Narrating Netflix

An Examination of the Narrative Structure of House of Cards

and Netflix's Position Within the Post-Network Era

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Introduction

Throughout the past three decades, traditional television has undergone significant changes and large television productions such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011) has garnered great attention and success. Many big-profile directors and actors from the film industry has switched to the television industry, which has resulted in an increase of large productions, and Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013) is a great example of this tendency. Director David Fincher, the man behind *Se7en* (1995), *Fight Club* (1997) and *The Social Network* (2010), joined forces with actor Kevin Spacey to create, what Spacey himself describes as "a sophisticated multi-layer story with complex characters who would reveal themselves over time" (Smith, 2013). Since the late 1980's, there has been an increase in what Robert J. Thompson (1997) terms "quality TV" (p. 35): a term that can be linked with Jason Mittell's theory of complex television, with HBO as frontrunner and pioneer with television series such as *The Sopranos* (1999) and *OZ* (1997). Now, with the switch from being just a distributor to producing their own original content, Netflix is one of the pioneers in the entertainment television industry and is challenging the norms and conventions of what is known as traditional serial television.

In the early days, watching television meant scheduling the day around various television broadcasts. Now, as a part of what Amanda Lotz defines as the Post-Network era, there is an increasing focus on new viewing habits and consumer control, with streaming services such as Netflix offering their audience a large online library of content, which the audience can access at any time. This project aims to examine Netflix's role as a producer and how they fit into the contemporary media landscape and television industry. With an analysis of their original series, *House of Cards*, this project aims to examine the narrative structure of the series, focusing on aspects where the Netflix produced series distinguishes itself from broadcast television, i.e. the distribution and production surrounding the series and how these aspects affect the narrative structure, relationship between character and narrator, and audience engagement. This analysis then functions as a foundation for a discussion of how Netflix and *House of Cards* fits within the description of the Post-Network era.

Methodology and Thesis Structure

The aim of this project is to examine Netflix and their role as not only a distributor but also a producer of content. More specifically, this project will examine how Netflix is changing the rules of the industry through a case study of the Netflix original series *House of Cards*. *House of Cards* has been chosen as a case study, as this was the first original drama series Netflix chose to pave their way into original programming. *House of Cards* adds to the development in serial filmic-narration and format the industry has witnessed throughout the past decades, and there are two elements that makes this series especially interesting: first, that a streaming service ventures into the land of original content and second, that Netflix broke with all of the traditions and conventions of distribution and made the entire first season of *House of Cards* available at once. The project will focus on the new mode of storytelling, which Jason Mittell (2015) refers to as "complex TV" (p. 3) – a narrative structure featured in many contemporary television series – and how Netflix follows this pattern with *House of Cards*. In *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling* (2015), Mittell provides an overview of nine elements, where the contemporary complex narrative distinguishes itself from the narrative structure of traditional television: Beginnings, Authorship, Characters, Comprehension, Evaluation, Serial Melodrama, Orienting Paratexts, Transmedia Storytelling, and Ends. This project aims to examine three of these elements in regards to the narrative structure of *House of Cards*: 1) the structure of the pilot, "Chapter 1", and how the series controls the audience's expectations, 2) the character development of the series protagonist Frank Underwood (with a particular focus on the use asides) and 3) how the series challenges the viewer comprehension and employs different narrative devices to keep their attention.

These three elements were chosen as the production of *House of Cards* differ from the production of cable television. Netflix signed *House of Cards* on for two seasons even before the crew had a finished pilot (Vankin, 2013) – if this gave them an advantage regarding the narrative structure of the series, knowing exactly were the story was going, then how is "Chapter 1" structured as a pilot, introducing the tone, style, and characters? Frank is the main protagonist of *House of Cards*, but even in this, the age of anti-heroes, Frank seems to take it to the next level. How does *House of Cards* portray Frank and his character's growth (if any) throughout the series – and as the series' narrator, how trustworthy is he really? Finally, as Netflix's original series are not bound by the same regulations as broadcast television, how does *House of Cards* engage its viewers and

keeps them motivated to watch the series? These are some of the questions, this project aims to answer.

Mittell's approach for his study is *poetics*, which he broadly defines as "a focus on the specific ways that texts make meaning, concerned with formal aspects of media more than issues of content or broader cultural forces" (2015, p. 5). As with Mittell, the approach for the project will be based on the *historical poetics* and *cognitive poetics*, developed by David Bordwell. Bordwell (2007a) characterizes historical poetics by "the phenomena it studies (films' constructional principles and effects) and the questions it asks about those phenomena - their constitution, functions, purposes, and historical manifestations" (p. 23). As Mittell (2015) mentions, historical context is vital to the study of narrative form, and to understand the workings of complex television, the industrial, technological and reception shifts need to be factored in when discussing the narrative structure of contemporary television (p. 5-6). This model focuses predominantly on the relationship between the industry and technology, while another approach, which others have termed cognitive poetics, is aimed at the reception contexts of cinema. Bordwell (2007a) argues the following:

> "… understanding narrative films can be seen as largely a matter of "cognizing." Going beyond the information given involves categorizing; drawing on prior knowledge; making informal, provisional inferences; and hypothesizing what is likely to happen next. To be a skilled spectator is to know how to execute these tacit but determining acts." (p. 137)

This cognitive approach will help determine how serial television manages viewer's knowledge and handles narrative information, to grain a stronger understanding of the appeal of complex television.

The focus of the case study has, as mentioned before, been narrowed down to three specific elements: the pilot, character development, and audience comprehension. Because of the use of the aside as a narrative technique, this project employs a specific focus on Frank's use of asides to establish an understanding of how the aside affects the structure of the narrative, the viewer's relationship with his character and how Frank is portrayed as a narrator. On the foundation of these

analyses, the project will discuss how *House of Cards* and Netflix as a platform correlates with and fits within Jason Mittell's theory of complex television and Amanda Lotz' definition of the Post-Network era.

The analysis of this project is divided into three parts. Following the historical poetics approach, the first two parts will focus on first the narrative structure of "Chapter 1", and how the series educates the audience on their strategies, followed by a deeper look into the character of Frank Underwood, and his development throughout the four seasons of the series. This analysis will pay close attention to the use of asides, as this specific device has a crucial impact on the viewer's relationship with Frank. Manfred Pfister is used to define and determine the theatric origin of the aside and combined with Volker Ferenz' definition of the unreliable narrator, this will form the basis for an analysis of the impact that the aside has on Frank as a narrator, and if this affects Frank's reliability as a narrator. The last part of the analysis will follow the approach of cognitive poetics and aims to determine the narrative devices used in *House of Cards* to engage the viewer. On the foundation of Mittell's complex television and Amanda Lotz' term 'post-network era', the analysis is then followed by a discussion on how Netflix fits into the contemporary media landscape and how they change the rules for production and design of the television serial. Additionally, this project will discuss concepts such as binge-watching, platform and format, and discuss how Netflix as a platform fits into the description of the post-network era.

It should be noted that when watching Netflix on a computer, the exact time stamp is not possible to note. Therefore, the time stamps in this project is counting down, and not up. The following section of the project includes a historical background of U.S. television context, which is relevant to the *House of Cards* case study by giving a frame of reference for the discussion of contemporary television. Furthermore, the section features an account of the theoretical framework for the thesis described above.

Background

The Evolution of the American Television Serial

Episodic television emerged in the postwar era, replacing radio broadcasts as the primary entertainment medium in the United States (Hagedorn, 1995, p. 37). While it started off as mainly a transmission device, by the early 1950's most of the signature genres of entertainment television – sitcoms, soap operas, westerns, cop shows, etc. – had been introduced, with radio shows and movies being the main source of inspiration regarding style and formula. Media scholar Robert J. Thompson (1997) discusses two types of live-programming: the comedy-variety show and the anthology drama, and while both were "victims of mass cultural natural selection" (p. 20), Thompson argues that the anthology drama is the most associated with the Golden Age of Television. The anthology drama was based on the New York Stage and presented both classic theater and independent, self-contained plays on a weekly basis, but as conditions changed and technology evolved, the anthology drama all but disappeared and was replaced with the episodic series. In the earlier years, it was the wealthy families with a higher level of educational qualifications who could afford a television – a social class more predisposed to watching classical theatre, as it was considered more elitist, but as production costs decreased and televisions gradually became a common household item, and as the television industry attempted to appeal to the growing audience, the episodic series with a consistent cast took over as the dominant form of television (Thompson, 1997, p. 22). Where the anthology dramas presented a brand new play every week, the audience could tune in to this new type of program (e.g. *I Love Lucy* (1951)) every week and know exactly what to expect. With a fixed cast and set, they were predictable and did not present a large surprise every week. Thompson (1997) defines them as "assembly-line productions" (p. 22), due to the repetitiveness, the reusability of the set and consistency of the format. However, the same repetition and consistency made the jobs of the cast and crew easier, and since production costs could be kept low, the episodic series was a preferable format for the distributors, as the gains were many and the risks few.

The traditional series can be compared to a collection of short stories: "Although they all were based on the same premise, individual episodes were independent of all the rest [and] by the end

of each instalment, everything had returned to where it was before it began" (Thompson, 1997, p. 33). This was partly due to the irregularity of the audience's viewing habits. The premise of the show itself usually provided the needed background knowledge, so if a viewer tuned in to the 24th episode of *All in the Family* (1971), they did not need to watch the previous 23 episodes to understand and enjoy the episode – missing a few episodes here and there did not detract from the understanding of the overall plot. John Ellis (1982) characterizes this type of series by "the constant repetition of basic narrative situations and characters: a family, a business enterprise, a hospital, etc." (p. 125). As the audience is well acquainted with the cast, the series can reuse the same pattern every week, and repeat known elements without substantial developments from one episode to the next. But throughout the 1980's, a new narrative pattern began to emerge – a pattern the series *Dallas* (1978) laid the groundwork for. This series featured a large cast, employed ongoing storylines instead of isolated episodes, and its expert use of the cliffhanger resulted in quite the stir in the summer of 1980, as there was only one question on everyone's mind: "Who shot J.R.?" (Thompson, 1997, p. 34). Consequently, this narrative pattern began to spread to other dramatic shows, and even sitcoms began employing ongoing storylines and the end of season cliffhanger. The 1980's presented the beginning of what Thompson terms "quality drama" (1997, p. 35): television series rooted in the soap opera featuring a new and careful attention to detail, complicated and season-long story arcs, large casts and thought-provoking subject matters. They defied the traditions of the simple and commercial television and changed the rules of prime-time television.

It's Not TV, it's HBO

When discussing Quality TV, it is near impossible not to bring up the influence that HBO (Home Box Office) has had on the television industry. In 1997, Thompson claimed that "Quality TV is best defined by what it's not. It's not 'regular TV'" (p. 13), which is exactly what HBO's slogan "It's not TV, it's HBO" presents. With original series such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992) and *Dream on* (1990), HBO has long been a pioneer within the industry, but with the creation of series like *Oz*, *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* (2001), they have "defined new rules for talking about, and understanding what we mean by, quality TV in the post-1996, post-network era" (McCabe & Akass, 2008, p. 84). HBO has positioned themselves as a role model for producing quality content; given its success in this, the HBO brand has become synonymous with quality drama series and premium

content, with a reputation for narratively complex serials. Other cable and broadcast channels have followed suit with FX and Showtime producing taboo-breaking dramas to match HBO's (e.g. *Nip/Tuck* (2003), *The Shield* (2002), *The L Word* (2004) and *Weeds* (2005)) and ABC seems to be taking note of the 'quality formula' with *Lost* (2004) and its long-arc serialized story arcs, genre emphasis and large cast (McCabe & Akass, 2008, p. 91). These facets of the serial narrative seem to be the reasoning for deeming it 'quality television' as opposed to their less narratively complex television counterparts.

The Rise of Netflix

Netflix was founded by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in 1997. The service originally operated as an online movie rental store, which included per rental fees and late fees: consumers would book DVDs online and they would be delivered to them within 24 hours. Two years later, in 1999, the company initiated a subscription service that would provide their customers with unlimited DVD rentals for a monthly subscription fee (Netflix Timeline, nd.) P. David Marshall (2013) describes this as providing "something of a cable/pay television feel to the subscription, giving subscribers a greater sense of control in their viewing choices" (p. 2). A year later they introduced a personalized movie recommendation system, in which the subscribers would rate movies, and through this data Netflix could then suggest selections to all their members. The base of subscribers grew steadily over the years and by the end of 2006, Netflix had gained 6,3 million U.S. subscribers (Netflix Timeline, nd.). In 2007, Netflix introduced streaming as an added feature to their DVD subscriptions, allowing members to watch movies or TV shows instantly over the internet. In the space of three years, Netflix had partnered up with different electronic companies to bring the internet, and more importantly Netflix, to the consumer's television sets, game consoles, smartphones, tablets – essentially any device with an internet connection. In 2010, Netflix took their streaming content beyond the US borders, launching their service in Canada, and as of 2016, Netflix is available worldwide and has over 80 million members globally (Netflix Timeline, nd.).

Since 2012, Netflix has been commissioning new and original content. The series *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black (2013)*, and the documentary *The Square* (2013) compiled 31 primetime Emmy nominations, including outstanding drama series, comedy series and

documentary or nonfiction (Netflix Timeline, nd). In 2013, *House of Cards* won three awards: Outstanding Casting for a Drama Series, Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series, and Outstanding Cinematography for a Single-Camera Series. Netflix was the first internet TV network nominated for the primetime Emmy, and was furthermore "the first quality media content generating platform to challenge old media structures" (Marshall, 2013, p. 2). Netflix has proved a challenger to companies such as HBO, who is usually regarded as equivalent to filmic quality television content, and they have utilized the technological developments, and cultural and social norms of television viewing. By making entire seasons of a series available on the first day, they show an interest in and understanding of their customers' new viewing habits, 'binging' several episodes in one sitting, hereby attracting a larger audience and simultaneously providing a guarantee of structure and support for the production company behind the series.

Theoretical background

Post-Network Era

In order to gain a larger understanding of how Netflix works, there is a need for knowing how television has evolved and gotten to this point in history. While most scholars have different opinions on the exact date where one period ends and another begins, most seem to agree on the separation of three periodizations with three overall themes: industry structure, audience targeting, and channel availability. Amanda Lotz provides an insightful timeline of the U.S. television industry and has labelled the three periods the *network era*, the *multi-channel transition*, and the *post-network era*, which she discusses in the second edition of *Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2014).

Lotz (2014) dates the network era from approximately 1952 to the mid-1980's (p. 22). While television began as a network-organized medium, many of the industrial practices and modes of organization that came to define the Network era was not established until the early 1960's: the television set had been developed, the main form of economic support was thirty-second advertisements, and there were three big national Networks – NBC, CBS and ABC - who dictated production terms and were the only outlets for high-budget original content, and because of the domestic and non-portable medium of the television set, the audience were left with few programming options (Lotz, 2014, p. 22-24).

New technological developments like cable television and the VCR expanded viewer control and choice in the beginning of 1980's. Lotz (2014) describes how "producers adjusted to government regulations that forced the networks to relinquish some of their control over the terms of program creation" (p. 25); this altered television experience led to the multi-channel transition as a result of the expanded user choice and control. New broadcast networks and the launch of subscription channels not only introduced an advertising-free form of television programming, but also led audiences to become increasingly more segmented. The emergence of many new networks and channels changed the competitive dynamics of the industry and while the networks in the previous era designed programming aimed at the entire family, the new dynamics resulted in

networks (and particularly cable channels) designing and developing programs aimed at a more specific audience (Lotz, 2014, p. 25-27).

Naming the third period the post-network era, Lotz (2014) acknowledges the "break from a dominant network-era experience, in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options" (p. 28). She argues, that the term 'post-network' is an indicator of more changes to come, and predicts a nonlinear form in the use of the medium. In the current television situation, viewers have an abundance of options to select from when, where, and what they want to watch (Lotz, 2014, p. 28). The industry has had to shift their aversion to new technologies, and instead embrace the changes and adjustments within the industry, which signifies a dramatic shift from the television experience in the dominant network-era to an era with much more user control – a control that has continued to increase throughout the Post-Network era. So much, in fact, that Lotz (2014) argues that "it has grown feasible to imagine a post-network era devoid of networks or channels as the distinctive industrial entities they've served thus far" (p. 28)

The shift in audience behavior of the post-network era are based on two central non-television-related factors: computing and generational shifts. The digital evolution has allowed for a merger of the television and computer screen and the generation commonly referred to as Millenials has grown up with the Internet, cable TV and smartphones, resulting in fluent and natural technological knowledge that their Baby Boomer parents has yet to reach (Lotz, 2014, p. 30). Content beyond the network platforms, e.g. the Internet, video streaming services, is increasing, and Lotz (2014) states that while features of a post-network era have become increasingly more apparent, "such an era will be fully in place only when choice is no longer limited to program schedules and the majority of viewers use the opportunities offered by new technologies and industrial practices" (p. 31-32). This post-network era allows the viewers to choose among programs produced in any decade, both created by professionals and amateurs, and allows them to choose their own time and place for viewing the program, be it a television, tablet or computer. This research will focus on the case of the Netflix produced show *House of Cards*, an online production by a streaming service, and as the series is therefore situated within Lotz' post-network era, this theory is included in the discussion and reflection on Netflix and its role as a producer.

Complex TV

Throughout the last couple of decades, television has undergone significant changes as an industry, and a new form of entertainment television has emerged with a new form of storytelling, which can be seen as a more complex alternative to the more traditional episodic serial form. In his book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling*, Jason Mittell (2015) argues that even though narrative complexity has not taken over the majority of television, it is sufficiently popular that the period of the 1990's to the present can be considered as "the era of complex television" (p. 30). Mittell (2015), who has termed this new mode of storytelling "narrative complexity" (p. 17), or complex television, describes it as being less uniform and convention-driven than the composition of the traditional episodic television serial – the most defining characteristic of the mode would be unconventionality, and this concept of narrative complexity complements Lotz' Post-Network era definition nicely.

The rise of narrative complexity coincides with an evolution within the television and media industry, both technologically and social economically – a key element in the development of this new mode being a change in the perception of television as a medium. According to Mittell (2015), there has been a change in the perception of contemporary television and its legitimacy (p. 31), as many of the creators of the more innovative television programs from the last two decades are individuals, who initially started their careers in the traditionally more prestigious medium of film (e.g. Martin Scorsese, Stephen Spielberg and of course the creator of *House of Cards*, David Fincher, to name a few). Part of the appeal for these creators is television's reputation "as a producer's medium, where writers and creators retain control of their work more than in film's director-centered model" (Mittell, 2015, p. 32) and the narrative complexity can be regarded as a response to the emergence of reality television. Additionally, there is ample opportunity for the creators to challenge their creativity, as the television format offers the options of extended character depth, more thorough on-going plotlines, and variations in the different episodes – options that a two-hour film cannot offer to the same extent.

Technological transformations, developments, and shifts within the television industry have helped the emergence and reinforcement of the complex narrative. After the mainstreaming of cable and VCR during the 1980's, a shift in the balance of distribution occurred. Traditionally, the medium had been controlled by the networks, who offered limited choices of entertainment within a regulated timeframe and with a specific schedule with no other access to content than their own. As Mittell (2015) states, this had an obvious effect on the structure of the programs at the time, because "while reruns proliferated in syndication, they typically were shown out of order, encouraging episodic narratives that could accommodate an almost random presentation of a series" (p. 36). This changed during the 1980's, especially with the development of the VHS, the Laserdisc and finally the DVD in the 1990's, and the audience gradually began to take control with new viewing patterns emerging. The audience was completely in control of their time spent in front of the television, and the technological advantages encouraged multiple viewings with fans binging several episodes of a series in one sitting, and many of the strategies employed by the complex programs have lasted, given not only their success but also the acceptance and embracement of these by the audience. The new technologies and an emergence of online participation (e.g. fan websites, online discussion forums and role-playing sites) have created a space for more robust fan cultures, actively engaging the audiences and creating a more involved viewer; the combination of these two aspects of fan cultures has created a sturdy foundation for the development of narrative complexity (Mittell, 2015, p. 41).

Mittell (2015) defines the basis of narrative complexity as:

"redefining episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" (18).

Complex programs do not necessarily dissociate themselves from the traditional soap opera, but they typically focus on characters over plots and downplay the melodramatic style of the soap opera, using the plot developments to form the character relationships and drama – a reversal of

the traditional soap opera style. They typically feature on-going relationship dramas and longer story arcs combined with the still present episodic plotlines. Mittell mentions Joss Whedon's *Buffy* (1997) and *Angel* (1999) as examples of complex programs, which manages to balance the episodic and serial storytelling. Both series are set in the same universe (or Whedonverse, as fans have taken to calling it) and presents "a rich and on-going mythology of a battle between the forces of good and evil, plotlines are centered upon season-long arcs featuring a particular villain, or 'big bad,' in *Buffy's* parlance" (Mittell, 2015, p. 19). Within any given season, almost every episode works to move the seasonal story arc forwards, while simultaneously offering mini-resolutions within the specific episode, and a battle with the 'monster of the week'. This strategy even applies to the more experimental episodes. A great example of Whedon's narrative skills is the the seventh episode of the sixth season of *Buffy*, "Once More with Feeling" (2001). This episode features the 'monster of the week' villain in the form of the demon Sweet, whose mere presence causes people around him to burst into song and dance, eventually leading the victims to spontaneously combust, and thus making way for the musical structure of the episode. Despite this unusual format of the episode and the 'one show only' villain, this episode propels the story arc forward by allowing the characters to reveal their deep, dark secrets to each other through song, while simultaneously irrevocably changing their relationships and hinting at developments to come. Many viewers praise Whedon for in this specific episode encapsulating the entire season's story arc (Rambo, Edwards & South, 2009, p. 170) and it follows Mittell's description nicely, by both offering a closure to the 'monster of the week' and adding to the season's story arc.

Complex television programs use a number of different storytelling techniques present in conventional television, but with a much subtler employment and to an even greater degree, making it more the norm than the exception: Analepses, dream or fantasy sequences, retelling the same story from different perspectives. Mittell (2015) argues the following:

"all of these devices, which vary from the "exceedingly obvious" mode of conventional television storytelling, typically maximize their obviousness by explicitly signaling them as differentials from a norm, predicated by expository narration ("I remember it well") or

contrived scenarios (such as hypnosis, courtroom testimonies, or recollections over a photo album) to highlight how the series is using nonconventional conventions" (p. 39).

Contrastingly, complex programs use different storytelling devices with a higher degree of fluency, playing with boundaries and fantasy sequences to flesh out character development, without worrying about confusing the viewer. Contemporary complex television programs often create frame stories, e.g. by teasing the climax of the story in the beginning of the episode, and then turning back the clock to recollect the story up until that point (e.g. *How to get away with Murder* (2014)). Another popular storytelling device in narrative complexity is breaking the fourth wall, an essential technique employed in *House of Cards*. There are several ways of employing this technique, which will be explained in detail in a later section.

In *Complex TV*, Mittell discusses the various ways that complex television is distinguished from traditional television narrative. The following features an exposition of three of these elements, as they will be the focus of the analysis in this project: 1) the use of the TV 'pilot', 2) character development and 3) viewer comprehension. The aim of this project is to, with the following techniques and strategies in mind, take a closer look at how *House of Cards* fits into Mittell's narrative complexity, and just how some of the narrative strategies are employed in the Netflix series with a particular focus on the character of Frank and the use of asides.

Beginnings

A television pilot has several responsibilities. Within the conventional industry, it serves as a potential series' test run, first for the networks then potential home viewers, who needs to be persuaded to keep watching. Mittell (2015) argues that a pilot "presents an encapsulation of what a series might be like on an ongoing basis, while providing an exceptional degree of narrative exposure to orient viewers within an often complex story world" (p. 56). This includes presenting the cast of characters with clear personalities and relationships and establishing the program's genre to control the matching of expectations with the audience, while simultaneously presenting the series as new and original enough to convince the viewer, this is not "just another" example of what they have seen before. Thus, Mittell (2015) argues that the "chief function of a television pilot

is to teach us how to watch the series, and in doing so, make us keep watching" (p. 56), noting how successful pilots are both "*educational*" and "*inspirational*" (p. 56). A successful pilot announces what it is, presents the set of characters and sets the parameters for what is to come, hereby creating the viewer's expectations and urging them to keep watching. A series Mittell mentions several times on the topic of complex television is Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997). Within the first 10 minutes of the pilot, "Welcome to the Hellmouth", the series manages to establish a set of characters with personalities and relationships, its own narrative voice (with fun, snappy dialogue) and set up the basic framework of the series. What is interesting about this series is the play on audience expectations. A new viewer would most likely expect a series with this amount of mythos to start out as an origin story – a girl who discovers, she is the Slayer and her subsequent story. The opening narration montage and the first scene after the title sequence certainly adds to this expectation, but the audience quickly learns that this is not the case. Buffy already knows, she is the Slayer – she arrives in Sunnydale packed with history and she wants to escape her life as a Slayer. The series furthermore takes the secret identity storyline and turns it around. Traditionally, the secret identity of a character is incorporated into a longer storyline revolving the secrecy of the identity and the people around finding out, as seen in the Netflix Original *Daredevil* (2015), where an important storyline in the first season is the secrecy of Matt Murdock's identity as the Daredevil. In *Buffy*, Xander, Jesse and Willow all find out about Buffy's identity by the end of the very first episode, thus drawing them into the action immediately. While the characters' introductions are not exactly mind-blowing, they do what they are supposed to – establish the relationships and quirky characteristics of the characters. The dialogue is snappy and playful, and it establishes the genre and presents the premise of the show, while simultaneously twisting the conventional genre pilot around.

As Netflix signed *House of Cards* on without a finished pilot episode (Vankin, 2013), this project aims to examine if that has had any effect on the structure of "Chapter 1".

Characters

Many television writers will say that character trumps plot. When the audience is charmed and lured in by compelling and engaging characters, the exciting storylines will come as well. Mittell (2015) argues that performance is always a collaborative art between the actors and the writers, and therefore "actors have varying degrees of creative authority and collaborative ownership over

their ongoing characters" (p. 119). This can create constraints for the storytelling, e.g. an actor wanting to leave a show sooner than planned, dies or gets too sick to work – this forces the writers to incorporate the character leaving the series in some way, as the audience is committed to the pairing of the actor and character. However, this can also benefit both the storytelling and the series as a part of the industry. Well-respected actors can draw in an audience with their participation and act as a seal of approval, but they can also create specific connotations for the audience, as they by default will be associated with previous roles and characters. Mittell (2015) exemplifies with Bryan Cranston's portrayal of Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008), where Cranston's previous role as loving and easygoing although somewhat inept Hal in *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000) leads the audience to bond and sympathies with Walter White (p. 152).

Mittell describes Murray Smiths theory on the audience's engagement with a series' characters in their search to identify with them – television cues the audience to *recognize*, *align* with and forge *allegiances* with characters to create bond between the audience and the characters because, as Mittell (2015) notes, "we temporarily give part of our selves over to a fiction to produce intense emotional affect" (p. 127). *Recognition* is marked as "one of the chief components of character engagement in cinema" (Mittell, 2015, p. 127) as the audience differentiates physically between the different characters within an ensemble cast, e.g. distinguishing lead roles from supporting characters, background extras etc. This can result in producers keeping surprise guest stars out of the credits - as with *Se7en* (1995), where Kevin Spacey was omitted from the credits to surprise the audience – but it can also lead to surprise deaths to counter the audience expectation of a stable core cast throughout the series' run. Mittell (2015) notes how "many complex programs have killed off major characters early in their runs to raise the dramatic stakes" (p. 124). In a show such as *Game of Thrones* (2011), where fan favorites are beheaded without notice, no character seems to be safe, but *House of Cards* also featured the surprising death of Zoe Barnes in the first episode of season two.

The concept of *alignment* explains the connection audience feels with certain characters and how they are sometime able to develop strong and sincere emotional attachments to them. When speaking of alignment, there are two central elements: "*attachment*, in which we follow the experiences of particular characters, and *access* to subjective interior states of emotions, thought processes, and morality" (Mittell, 2015, p. 129). Attachment is a vital element when dealing with a

long-form serial, as the audience's attachment can change from episode to episode. Attachment refers to the width of the narrative, i.e. the number of characters the viewer follows, and with a big ensemble cast, the attachment can vary across scenes and episodes. Film and television rarely provides the same subjective access to a character's interior as literature, but the medium has its own technique for giving the audience access to a character's inner thoughts and feelings. Some programs allow for greater access to subjectivity through e.g. voice-over narration, fantasy sequences, or breaking the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly, a technique frequently used in House of Cards. However, most commonly the medium uses exterior markers to convey interior voices or to emotional states to the viewer (appearance, dialogue, actions, etc.). Mittell (2015) argues the how viewers, through a long-term investment in a series, "accrue knowledge and experiences about characters that allow [them] to posit [their] own version of the interiority" (p. 132). This is furthermore a tactic employed by complex television, as one of the attractions of complex TV is the play and puzzle-solving nature of the programs.

Lastly, Mittell (2015) discusses Murray's third factor of character engagement *allegiance*: "the moral evaluation of aligned characters such as we find ourselves sympathetic to their beliefs and ethics and thus emotionally invested in their stories" (p. 134). Changes in allegiance can occur, when a character changes: through a character's changing actions and the viewer's reactions, the allegiances is relocated through the cast of characters. Mittell (2015) mentions different models of character arcs: *character growth*, *character education*, *character overhaul* and *character transformation* (p. 137-141). Character growth refers to the 'coming of age' narrative, where a character matures and grows over time, a storyline which is most common with young characters. The audience is at the beginning aware that the character is not fully grown, and therefore expects a change. When a mature character learns an important life lesson over the course of a series, it is labelled character education. If the character changes more abruptly, it falls under the character overhaul – this notion refers to more supernatural settings, e.g. characters changing bodies. The last model of character arcs, is the character transformation – the most traditional of the character arcs. This model refers to the gradual transformation of an adult character over time, where they change their morality, attitude and sense of self.

Comprehension

There are several different ways with which viewers engage with a television series, but at its basics, engagement begins with comprehension – making sense of it all. Mittell (2015) argues that "complex television has increased the medium's tolerance for viewer's to be confused, encouraging them to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend the narrative" (p. 164). While traditional television would strive to create as little confusion as possible, complex narratives makes an effort to engage and challenge the audience. Information management is key when consuming a narrative, and Mittell (2015) argues that "most of this information management is preconscious and automatic, driven by underlying assumptions and conventions" (p. 167). These processes of assumptions rely on cognitive schemata, which viewers develop through their assumption of media, and many narrative schemata are based on the norms of the television medium (Mittell, 2015, p. 167). Bordwell *(2012)* distinguishes between these, which he calls *extrinsic norms*, and what he calls *intrinsic norms*. Extrinsic norms refer to e.g. genre conventions and stylistic modes – norms "codified by tradition" (Bordwell, 2012) and conventions which the audience through time and tradition has been taught to expect. Intrinsic norms refer to the pattern of coherence established by the television series itself, or in Bordwell's words: "storytelling methods that are set up, almost like rules for a game, for the specific film" (2012) – this is what the series teaches the viewer to expect, e.g. the direct addressing of the audience on Malcom in the Middle (2000). These norms can be violated to create confusion and engage the viewer's attention by "shattering expectations by shifting comprehension processes from preconscious assumptions and interferences to conscious hypothesis" (Mittell, 2015, p. 169). By mixing familiarity with a break with the expectations, it keeps the audience interested and focused. Variations can include a change in storytelling perspective or genre (over the last few years there seems to have emerged a trend in musical episodes of television series, e.g. *Scrubs* (2001), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005).

Bordwell discusses the terms *curiosity hypothesis* and *suspense hypothesis*, which Mittell refers to as *anticipation hypothesis*. Curiosity hypothesis refers to the process of creating hypotheses about the past while anticipation hypothesis is used to refer to hypotheses about the future (Bordwell, 2007a, p. 139). Complex television uses narrative enigmas and statements to

prompt these hypotheses from the viewer as an emotional response but at the same time staying within the frames of the fictional world - as Mittell (2015) argues, "the ideal surprise is followed by a viewer thinking "I should have seen that coming," suggesting unexpected but effective internal motivation" (p. 172). Narrative statements are events which assert a straightforward story element with no uncertainty whatsoever, e.g. a marriage or death of a character. These type of events clearly change the status quo of the fictional world, but there are no real questions as to when, why or how the event happened (Mittell, 2015, p. 24). Narrative enigmas, on the other hand, are ambiguous events, which raise uncertainty and numerous questions about the situation at hand. Mittell (2015) argues that "narrative enigmas and statements lead to different modes of engagement for viewers, prompting various forms of suspense, surprise, curiosity, and theorizing" (p. 26). As for the concept of suspense, Mittell (2015) describes it as "a subset of anticipation hypothesis in which the events that viewers hope to happen to characters in risky situations seemingly has a low probability of occurring within the story world" (p. 171). The audience is reacting to a narrative statement by hypothesizing about the outcome of the event on both macro plot levels and micro scene levels. According to Bordwell, the audience will experience suspense whether or not they are aware of the outcome, as the tensions of the suspense is based on how the event will reach the outcome and not the outcome itself (2007b). This correlates with Hitchcock, who stated that suspense derives from the audience being unable to intervene in the fictional world, and his classic example with the bomb under the table exemplifies just that (Truffaut, 1985, p. 73).

Lastly, though the technological changes and developments have made the culture of binge-watching more common, there is still a need for programs created for what Mittell (2015) calls a "domestic environment" (p. 181), which means the gaps between episodes and seasons need to be taken into account. There are different devices and strategies for triggering the viewer's memory; one of the most common devices is called *diegetic retelling*, where the dialogue in used to remind the audience of important information, be it events, character names or characteristics, etc. Often, a new character enters who needs an explanation for a past situation or specific concept, which puts this new character in the audience's place. Some programs also use *visual cues* to trigger the viewer's memory, as this device is subtler than the use of dialogue. This can include shots of specific settings, objects or even certain shot compositions. Mittell (2015) notes how visual cues function

less "to catch up viewers who might have missed an episode than to integrate past events into a naturalistic style of moving-image storytelling that still activates the viewers' memories" (p. 183). Other programs use "nonnaturalistic techniques" (Mittell, 2015, p. 183) to trigger the viewer's memory. This can include *voice-over narration*, both the subjective first-person voice-over and the third-person omniscient narrator, or *flashbacks*. First-person subjective flashbacks are used to present a single character's memory, while objective third-person flashbacks, or "replays" (Mittell, 2015, p. 186) are used more to fill in backstory. Outside the fictional world, most programs include a short recap before each episode, 'previously on…', to activate specific events in the viewer's memory and bring them up to date. This is especially efficient if the series brings up plot points from several episodes or even seasons back. Simultaneously, the absence of a recap can create what Mittell (2015) refers to as "surprise memory" (p. 191), as the viewer's memory is not triggered before the exact moment, the past event or character becomes relevant.

The Unreliable Narrator

When discussing narration in fiction, an important element of interest is the notion of truth and authenticity. In "Fight Clubs, American Psychos and Mementos", Volker Ferenz (2005) discusses the concept of narrators in cinema, and how it can be associated with the concept of unreliability. Overall, he distinguishes between two basic types of unreliable narrators: the voice-over narrator and the character-narrator. The main reason for this separation, is based on the use of the term 'unreliable', which Ferenz finds problematic. He argues that a characteristic such as 'unreliable' is predominantly used to describe individuals, or 'real' people, therefore, making it illogical to apply that characteristic to a theoretical construct or a voice-over narrator, who in most cases have little to no authority over the presentation of the narrative in a film (Ferenz, 2005, p. 135). On the other hand, pseudo-diegetic character-narrators are treated by the audience as 'real people', who can be held accountable for inaccuracies and unreliability in the fictional world – a character-narrator can function as a "clearly identifiable scapegoat with sufficient 'authority' over the narrative as a whole, whom we can blame for textual contradictions and referential difficulties" (Ferenz, 2005, p. 135). According to Ferenz, the audience is likely to attribute inconsistencies to supernatural forces or fantastic elements (e.g. in films such as *Secret Window* (2004) or *The Sixth Sense* (1999)), or the notion of the uncanny.

Ferenz distinguishes between two types of voice-over narrators: the heterodiegetic or third-person voice-over narrator and the homodiegetic or first-person voice-over narrator. The heterodiegetic voice-over narrator is usually equipped with the human-like trait of a voice and is commonly given complete authority as a neutral third party. Their neutral involvement in the fictional story gives the narrator a great amount of freedom, however, this lack of involvement in story matters poses a problem concerning the term 'unreliable'. Ferenz (2005) argues that "the heterodiegetic voice-over narrator is inevitably sandwiched between the extradiegetic level of the cinematic narrator (outside the story world) and the intradiegetic level of the characters (inside the story world)" (p. 144). The heterodiegetic narrator is not a part of the fictional world of the characters and is therefore always to some degree removed from the images. Though the voice-over can be fallible concerning their own thoughts, the narrator cannot misinterpret the events of the story because they are outside of influence regarding the the images presented to the audience. In contrast to the heterodiegetic voice-over narrator, who commonly lacks both personality and involvement in the fictional story, the homodiegetic or first-person voice-over narrator can be given both a voice and a body. However, a character speaking in voice-over is still regarded somewhat ambiguous, as the character in most cases makes no claim to being the creator of the images presented to the audience, thus remaining rather shadowy. The homodiegetic voice-over narrator typically accompanies the image-track and provides the audience with additional information. An example of this is Max' character in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). The movies opens with a voice-over narration to set the scene and give a bit of insight to the character of Max. Ferenz (2005) compares the homodiegetic narrator in film to that in literature, arguing that the homodiegetic narrator in literature "is most often the sole source of the narrative and can manipulate the story data just as [they like]" (p. 147) - in film, the narrator can do just the same. However, the voice-over's statements are simultaneously accompanied by images that can contradict and reveal the truthfulness and reliability of the speaker's claims. Ferenz points out that the voice-over narrator often functions as 'filters', which shows the audience the fictional world through their eyes, and therefore they cannot be the source of the fictional narrative in its entirety. They are not in a position to misrepresent the narrative, as they do not have authority over it (Ferenz, 2005, p. 148).

The last type of narrator is the pseudo-diegetic narrator, which Ferenz (2005) argues is the only type of narrator that the term 'unreliable' can be properly applied to, as this type deals with a "human-like narrator" (p. 153) with authority over their own narrating and in a position to take the blame for any inaccuracies. According to Ferenz, the pseudo-diegetic character-narrator is a somewhat rare type of narrator in the cinema, but exactly this type of narrator is crucial to the purpose of this project, as Frank is a character in the diegesis, who additionally functions as a narrator through his various asides. There are different ways to incorporate this type of narrative in a film, but, as Ferenz (2005) notes, the most common way of achieving a pseudo-diegetic effect is to have a character tell their story to another character: "the primary narrative level gives way to the embedded narrator who takes over the function of the principal storyteller" (p. 149). This can be exemplified with Tim Burton's film *Big Fish (2003)* wherein the character Edward Bloom, who has been know through his life as an avid storyteller, spends his last few days of his life telling his son, Will Bloom, a collection of events from his life. The film frequently moves back and forth between the levels of narrative (Edward's story world and the diegetic world of the film), and there is no mistaken of the two levels. Ferenz (2005) argues that in some cases, the films seem to create the sense of character-narrator so imbedded in the narrative "that the viewer accepts the pseudo-diegetic narrator is if [they] were not only a creation but, first and foremost, a creator" (p. 151). Thus, the audience is persuaded to believe that techniques such as the voice-over, subjective camera, composition of screen space, and even the musical score is generated by the protagonist themselves.

This is exactly the case with *House of Cards*. Frank Underwood is a part of the fictional world and can thereby not be classified as the "heterodiegetic or third-person voice-over narrator" (Ferenz, 2005, p. 141) who functions outside of the fictional world, nor is he identical with the "homodiegetic or first-person voice-over narrator" (Ferenz, 2005, p. 145), though he is closer to this type than the aforementioned. Though he is a first-person narrator with "a voice and a body" (Ferenz, 2005, p. 145), he uses the aside rather than the traditional voice-over. In his article "Putting television 'aside': novel narration in House of Cards", Mario Klarer (2014) discusses Ferenz' use of the term 'pseudo-diegetic' as being directly to the point, as Frank Underwood plays his crucial part in the storyline, but then at times seems to take a step outside the storyline to comment on it. Frank's role as a narrator seemingly moves in and out of the diegesis, yet never completely leaving

the diegesis, making the term 'pseudo' applicable to his character. Klarer (2014) argues then that to the contrary "[Frank's] seeming transcendence of the story world in the asides is what actually is the major force that fuels the story as such" (p. 211). With his clearly identifiable character, Frank functions as a pseudo-diegetic character-narrator, with whom the audience can identify with and relate to. At the beginning of the series, Frank seems like a perfectly reliable narrator, letting the audience in on his secret motives and plans. This project will take a closer look at this reliability and aims to shed a light on just how trustworthy a character-narrator (and politician) Frank Underwood is. How much can the audience (and the American public) actually depend on him and his actions?

The Dramatic Aside

One of the narrative techniques Mittell mentions as being employed often in the complex television programs is the dramatic aside (2015, p. 49), a technique which traditionally derives from the theatrical stage, and is quintessential when discussing the Netflix series *House of Cards*. In *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, Manfred Pfister distinguishes between three forms of the theatrical aside: the monological aside, the dialogical aside, and the aside ad spectators. While they all bear a resemblance to the soliloquy, *the monological aside* is the most similar, as it does not address another character on stage. However, while a soliloquy most often happens when the character is alone on stage, the speaker of a monological aside is not alone on stage, nor does he believe himself to be. Pfister explains this form of aside as a convention that disregards the circumstances of real life to an even greater degree than the soliloquy. A convention that "breaks all the laws of acoustics, according to which a speech that cannot be heard by a dialogue partner on stage is much less likely to be heard by the audience at the back of the auditorium" (Pfister, 1991, p. 138) as well as it being psychologically unrealistic for an individual to be thinking aloud for a period of time this extended. Like the conventional soliloquy, the monological aside allows the character to reflect directly on his thoughts either by truthfully and bluntly commenting on a particular situation or character, or to express information regarding a particular character or situation.

While *the dialogical aside* in reality does not belong in a category regarding any form of monological speech, it is still based on the convention of speech being 'heard' by the audience but not by certain characters on stage. As Pfister (1991) mentions, this type of aside "is generally conditioned by conspiratorial dialogue or dialogue in an eaves-dropping situation" (p. 140) and is

commonly expressed by grouping characters together in a particular way on stage, typically drawing the characters participating in the dialogical aside together near the front of the stage, while the remaining characters stay put behind them. This type of aside functions more or less like the monological aside, only as a conversation between two (or more) characters, except of just one.

Lastly, the third, and for this project, the most relevant type of aside, *the aside ad spectators*, that is imbued with dialogical elements, breaks through the internal communicative system by addressing the audience. Also known as 'breaking the fourth wall', this type of aside is usually found in comedy plays and, as Pfister (1991) notes, is frequently used by the play's villains or servants (p. 139). Exemplifying with an excerpt from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Pfister (1991) discusses how this type of aside can be used to create a comic effect:

> "One of the functions of these asides is to inform the audience about the background to the dramatic situation and the speaker's plans and thus both to create a level of suspense for what is to follow and to ensure that the audience has an informational advantage over the victims of the intrigue" (p. 140).

Furthermore, they serve to create a feeling of 'complicity' in the audience. This specific type of aside is important in relation to *House of Cards*, as it is used by Frank Underwood regularly throughout the show. By specifically addressing the audience and letting them in on his secret plans and schemes, he, as a narrator, attempts to strengthen the relationship and connection between his own character and the audience. Frank's role as narrator, his use of *the aside ad spectators* (and the consequences hereof), and the relationship between his character and the audience will be examined further in the analysis.

Analysis

House of Cards (2013) is an American political drama, adapted from the BBC miniseries of the same name, and based on the novel by Michael Dobbs. Set in present day Washington DC, the series follows the Southern democrat and ambitious US congressman Francis "Frank" J. Underwood (played by Kevin Spacey) and his equally ambitious wife, Claire Underwood (played by Robin Wright), who runs an NGO, the Clean Water Initiative ("CWI"). When Frank is passed over as the new Secretary of State, after successfully having supported the President of the United States in his election campaign, he silently swears revenge on the people who betrayed him, and initiates an elaborate plan behind the president's back to gain a place of greater power with aid from his wife.

Welcome to Washington

On the surface, the pilot episode of *House of Cards* distinguishes itself from the traditional serial television structure, as it can be argued how *House of Cards* views more like a 13-hour movie than a series with 13 isolated episodes (which will be discussed in more detail later). However, in line with the opening of a film, "Chapter 1" of *House of Cards* needs to motivate and persuade the viewer to keep watching the rest of the series as well as teach the audience how to watch it.

"Chapter 1" starts out with a long cold opening (three minutes and 35 seconds), functioning as short introduction to both the main character Frank, but also President-elect Garrett Walker, Vice President Jim Matthews, and Chief of Staff Linda Vasquez who will prove to fall victim to Frank's wrath during the first two seasons. The opening begins with an event that is seemingly inconsequential to the over-all narrative, but crucial to the portrayal of Frank's character. Before the image shows up on the screen, the audience hears the screeching of tires, a crash and the whimpers of a dog (56:17). With no images, the audience is from the first frame left to think for themselves and figure out what happened own their own. While the details of this exact situation are not tough to figure out, *House of Cards* slowly teaches and trains the audience to pay attention, starting from the first frame. The first image on the screen presents Frank Underwood in a half-put-together tuxedo, opening the front doors and stepping out onto the street, as the driver of the hit-and-run flees the scene. He tells another man, who is later identified as Steve, to go alert the Wharton's, as Frank recognizes the dog as theirs. At this point, the audience has not been given a lot of direct information regarding the location and the identity of who this man is, leaving them to

speculate about the characters on the screen in front of them. Who are the two men and what is their relationship? The dialogue between them ("Did you get a good look" – "Blue Toyota Camry, that's all I saw" (55:58)) could suggest an employer-employee relationship but nothing is confirmed yet. After having sent Steve away, Frank kneels down by the wheezing dog and quietly suffocates it, while giving the audience their first experience of the fourth-wall break that they will need to get accustomed to. Initially, it seems Frank might just be talking to the dog or himself, as if thinking out loud, but then he directs his gaze directly at the camera, telling the audience "I have no patience for useless things" (55:23).

This scene has several functions. First of all, the audience is presented to Frank's aside, a technique frequently used throughout the series. The ambiguity of the beginning of the monolog almost seems to ease the audience into this distinctive technique. Secondly, it gives the audience a glimpse into the character of Frank. The whimpering dog is without a doubt in pain and by quietly putting the dog of its misery, all the while letting the audience know that he is willing to do the unpleasant, but necessary thing, this situation portrays Frank as a harsh but fair man. The Whartons arrive, confirming that the dog is theirs, while Frank confirms the employer-hypothesis: "Steve is going to file the report on the car, and he'll put his people on it. We'll track them down" (54:54). This comment also gives the audience a clue regarding Frank's character - what kind of profession requires him to have a bodyguard? The camera then cuts to interior of Frank's house, where he and his (presumed) wife finish getting dressing, and by this point, the audience have deduced a few of Frank's character traits: a good neighbor, a loving partner, important enough to have at least one bodyguard.

The next cut dates the scenario – New Year's Eve 2012 at the stroke of midnight, which puts the series in contemporary time, as *House of Cards* premiered on Netflix in February 2013. At this big event, Frank kisses his partner and then addresses the viewer again, this time with no ambiguity whatsoever (54:15). During this aside, he presents the audience to President-Elect Garrett Walker, while providing his own personal opinion on the man. This confirms the hypothesis that The Underwoods are socialites, if they spend New Years Eve at The White House; Frank's mentioning of his "22 years in congress" (53:53), provides another clue regarding his relation to The White House: he is or used to be, a member of congress. He carries on to present and comment on both the Vice President, Jim Matthews, and the Chief of Staff, Linda Vasquez, before finally revealing that he holds

the position of a "lowly House Majority Whip" (53:15) – but he is on to bigger things, so it will not last much longer.

This cold opening clearly sets the tone and setting for the series through the use of Washington and the president. This is helped along by the title sequence which features a 1.45 minutes long time lapse sequence portraying a dark and gritty DC, setting the scene within the political sphere of the United States. Mittell (2015) argues that "most contemporary programs either forego opening credit sequences entirely or precede shorter sequences with a teaser sequence to immerse viewers in the narrative" (p. 57). This does not apply to House of Cards, as the title sequence demands the viewer's focus all on its own and portrays thematic ideas such as power, which, combined with the dark and gritty images, greatly reflects the influence of Fincher (Beyl, 2013; Granild, 2014), which will be further discussed in the coming paragraph. This seems to be a tendency with Netflix Originals, as their title sequences are usually longer and more heavy with symbolism. *Daredevil*, for example, shows different buildings and monuments from Hells Kitchen slowly materializing as they are drenched in the same red color as Daredevils suit, representing how he sees the world, both literally and figuratively: a city on fire. *Orange is the New Black* features short close ups of different faces, portraying the many different people and lives affected by minimal security incarceration. The intro sequences of their cable counterparts usually show clips from the series, featuring the characters along with the actor's name, e.g. *Suits* (2011), where the intro sequence features clips from New York intercut with clips of the series' two main characters. The opening of the first episode creates a substantial amount of context, not only for rest of the episode, but also for the over-all series; within the first ten minutes, the main characters, the setting, and the entire premise for the season has been revealed – the consequences of the rejection of Frank as Secretary of State, and the continuous fourth wall break, being the two most important elements. The rest of the episode expands upon this, and further establishes the intrinsic norms for the series, as well as making connections to the relevant extrinsic norms, style and narrative mode - concepts which will be analyzed in a later section.

Fincher's influence is evident not only in title sequence, but in the overall cinematography of *House of Cards*. Aesthetically and stylistically, *House of Cards* portrays the cold and harsh world the Underwood's inhabit. The color palette consists of blues, greys and teals and both the characters'

costumes and their surroundings adds to the portrayal of the characters. The use of light (or lack thereof) is furthermore very Fincheresque (Granild, 2014), as the use of darkness and shadows reflects the darkness wherein the character, especially Frank, moves. An interesting contrast is found in "Chapter 1", where the scene at the New Years Eve party is brightly lit (54:18), as this portrays Frank's face outwardly. However, as soon as Frank and Claire are alone in the car on their way home (51:19), they are covered in shadows, reflecting their true selves. The camera work clearly reflects the overall theme of the series: power. With its slow, almost lazy, but deliberate movements, preferring to shadow the character's actions and movements instead of cutting between angles, the camera effectively portrays the relentless focus and almost diabolical drive that defines Frank Underwood's character. In an interview, the show's cinematographer Eigil Bryld mentions that "everything was to be very composed, and designed to communicate a sense of power and space" (Kreindler, 2013). This underlying theme is evident in the cinematography, and each shot reflects the power relationship between the characters in the scene.

One of the most characteristic narrative techniques used in *House of Cards* is the breaking of the fourth wall. Frank frequently addresses the audience directly, and the use of this technique establishes Frank as the main character of the series, as he is quickly introduced as the narrator of his own story, which the audience will follow. These asides of Frank's have different functions depending on the context that they are deployed in. Klarer (2014) explains how the aside acts as "a built-in commentary and guideline for reading correctly the actions of the protagonist. Frank keeps giving us clues whenever his actions or words seem to contradict his real character" (p. 208). Sometimes their role is as simple expositional devices, as the presentation at the New Years Eve party, or Frank's comment after a meeting with Linda Vasquez: "Did you smell that? The smugness, the false deference. She thinks I can be bought with a pair of tickets. What am I, a whore in post-war Berlin? Salivating over free stockings and chocolate? What she's asking will cost far more than that" (27:44). Other times they function as interrupting outbursts within onscreen conversations, having Frank contemplate the situation out loud to the audience. Just before the abovementioned meeting with Linda Vasquez, Frank takes a short moment to muse on the reason for the subsequent meeting and its potential outcome: "It's quite rare for a president's chief of staff to climb the hill. A gesture of respect, no doubt, or desperation. I'm guessing she'll say "Donald Blythe for education".

Let's see if I'm right" (29:19), and then proceeds to look exasperated towards the audience during the conversation, to let them in on the ridiculousness of the situation. The use of asides helps establish Frank as the main character, and gives the audience access to the inner workings of the White House through Frank's perspective, providing them with a gateway, to what could be considered a secret world.

The central figure of the story is clearly Frank, as almost every other character exists primarily in relation to him. The Underwoods are portrayed as an extreme power couple, with Frank having a powerful position within the government, and Claire working as the head of a successful charitable organization, thereby not without political savviness herself. When Frank neglects to contact her after his first meeting with Linda Vasquez and comes home late, Claire reminds him that they "do things together. When you don't involve me, we're in free fall" (42:01). This establishes Claire's need to be significant. She does not want to be merely a politician's wife, who sits at home, while her husband sees to all the action alone. They are stronger than that, they are equal – at least if you ask Claire. Frank later comments: "I love that woman. I love her more than sharks love blood" (38:32), insinuating that he agrees with Claire on the dynamic between the two, yet, as the viewer later finds out, he has no problem betraying his wife for his own profit. Both reporter Zoe Barnes and congressman Peter Russo are introduced without an immediate connection to Frank, but as the pilot progresses, Zoe enters a business agreement with Frank, and Peter Russo ends up as Franks lap dog. In the opening, Frank introduced the audience to the three most important people in the White House – and consequently the tree people he vows to ruin for having passed him over.

The main storyline of the season follows Frank, who is livid after being passed over as Secretary of State. This storyline sets sails, as he schemes with his employee and right-hand man Doug Stamper on how to best get revenge over the people who has betrayed him – beginning with the newly appointed Secretary of State, Michael Kern. As Frank notes, "That's how you devour a whale, Doug. One bite at a time" (37:25). Zoe's journey to the top of *The Herald* food chain is quickly intertwined with Frank's revenge scheme, as they begin a business arrangement, wherein Frank uses Zoe to exploit and manipulate his colleagues into submission, while Zoe uses Frank to gain more attention and respect in her field as a journalist. Peter Russo, a congressman from Philadelphia, is busy with his own storyline (which includes poor work performance, sleeping with

his assistant, and drinking too much) until his alcoholic tendencies lands him in jail after a DUI arrest. This situation is where his storyline intertwines with Frank's, as Frank bailing him out places him heavily in Frank's debt, and thereby forcing him to do Frank's bidding. Lastly, there is Claire's job at the CWI and their future development and expansion. This is the most stand-alone storyline, but it is still partly set in motion by a donation contingent on Frank getting nominated as Secretary of State falling through, as this results in a change of course and a large round of layoffs at CWI. As all the other storylines have greatly intertwined with Frank's revenge plot, the audience is right to expect them to intertwine even further. Mittell (2015) describes conventional television narratives as featuring the following:

> "two or more plotlines, that complement each other: a main A plot that dominates the screen time and secondary B plots that may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to the A plot but rarely interacts with the level of action" (p. 42).

The complexity of the narrative in *House of Cards* works against these norms, as the various plotlines often coincide and collide throughout the season. Many of the smaller personal storylines in *House of Cards* are significant and evolve throughout the season; some as consequences of the main storyline, and some affect the main storyline, while still being subordinate to the main storyline of Frank's political ambitions.

If a traditional television series can be compared to a collection of short stories, *House of Cards* could be compared to the novel, and there are several narrative devices that give weight to such a comparison. First, the episodes are all given the title of chapters: "Chapter 1", "Chapter 2", etc. The long and complex storyline and plots creates a feeling of continuity throughout the entire season, telling one long story and not several short stories. Second, the use of Frank's asides and his role as a narrator links the narrative to that of a novel even more, as a first person narrator is most commonly found in literature rather than in film or television. Through the use of these components, *House of Cards* puts aside the serial format of traditional television and evolves into a complex web of narratives, including author, character, plot, and narrator.

"Chapter 1" of House of cards teaches the audience how to watch the series and what to expect from future episodes, while simultaneously inspiring the viewer to keep watching. The presentation of the different storylines prepares the audience for multiple story threads interweaving with each other, e.g. Frank's first meeting with Doug which introduces not only the main storyline of season one, Frank's revenge plan, but also the destruction of Kern's candidacy as Secretary of State, which lasts the first two episodes. Then there is the smaller storyline of the hit-and-run, which is ended within "Chapter 1", as the driver is caught at the end of the episode. The uncompleted storylines create narrative enigmas: How will Frank carry out his plan and how far is he willing to go? What will happen to the poor and unfortunate Peter as Frank's lapdog? If Frank is as ruthless and vicious as he seems to be, how will the arrangement between him and Zoe end? And who is in charge in the Underwoods' seemingly powerful relationship? Enigmas that the audience will have to keep watching the show to get the answers to. The fact that Netflix signed on for a second season run without a finished pilot to approve (Vankin, 2013) allows House of Cards to focus entirely on storytelling and characterization. Rather than spending unnecessary time with artificial cliffhangers, they are able to include scenarios such as the first scene with the dog, which has no real meaning for the storyline but exists solely for the purpose of establishing Frank's main character traits. "Chapter 1" establishes the series' tone, theme, style and narrative characteristics as well as presenting a set of interesting characters and events, motivating the audience to keep watching to find out how they are linked.

Let's be Frank

One of the initial great draws of *House of Cards* was the involvement of Kevin Spacey. As a respected multiple Academy Award winning actor his name alone functioned as a seal of approval. Mittell (2015) argues that "actors serve as sites of intertextuality, merging viewer memories of previous characters and knowledge about off-screen lives to color our understanding of a role" (p. 122). This notion plays an important role regarding House of Cards, as the audience has a history with Spacey in villainous roles, such as *Se7en*, where he portrayed the embodiment of evil - a serial killer who uses his own death to make victims do his bidding, or in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), where he fooled the whole world regarding the true identity of mythical crime kingpin Keyser Söze. Mittell (2015) discusses how Bryan Cranston's role as Hal in *Malcolm in the Middle* was an "important

framework for how Walter White was perceived" (p. 152), and made his transformation "from Mr. Chips to Scarface" more believable - the same can be argued with the case of Kevin Spacey. These manipulative, psychotic, and villainous roles play a crucial role in the perception of Spacey in the role of Frank Underwood. Only, this is not the story of how Mr. Chips became Scarface. There is no journey - Scarface is already here. *House of Cards* is not the tale of the deterioration of Frank Underwood's moral – that ship sailed long ago. *House of Cards* is the tale of when Mr. Scarface goes to Washington.

After being cast in the role as Frank Underwood, Spacey spent a year at the Old Vic starring as the title role in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a role Fincher himself called "great training" (Sepinwall, 2013). This makes great sense, because the setting, plot and characters of *House of Cards* are all conduits that refer back to the compositions of Elizabethan theatrical plays, in particular Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Spacey himself has stated that, as the original source material, the book and the original TV series, is written based on Richard's direct address, "Frank wouldn't exist without Richard III" (A. Thompson, 2014). The plot and setting of *House of Cards* mirrors that of *Richard III*, in which the story takes place at the Lancastrian court in London, and the play's main character, *Richard III* himself, is a villain-like character who, ridiculed for his physical defect, encompasses feelings of being neglected and passed over regarding a position of power, and therefore vows revenge. With cunning schemes, he plans a way to get rid of his competitors to the crown of England, even ruthlessly betraying his own brother in the process. In the modern day center of power, Washington DC, Frank, unable to accept the position of Secretary of State allotted to anyone else, mimics this logic and swears to take revenge – at all costs. Additionally, there is a specific character trait that Frank shares with his Shakespearean counterpart: a love of breaking the fourth wall. Furthermore, this narrative technique is crucial for the relationship between Frank and the audience.

As mentioned in the theory section, Smith's notion of *alignment* consists of the two key elements: *attachment* and *access*. In its first scene, *House of Cards* presents Frank as what Ferenz (2014) calls the "pseudo-diegetic narrator" (p. 153) and, thereby, establishes that this is where the viewer's alignment will lie. The fourth wall break is important, as it provides the audience access to character interiority and allows them to bond with the villainous protagonist.

While putting down the dog in "Chapter 1", Frank states: "Moments like this require someone who will act, who will do the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing" (55:35) to clarify and justify his actions. Upon examining the fatally wounded dog, he does what would be considered the most considerate thing in a situation like this, by putting the dog out of its misery. Although this scene does not depict Frank as a sympathetic man, this action indicates that he is a heroic figure, someone who is able to do what is necessary – the right thing – however hard or unpleasant it may be. Soon after, the audience finds Frank in his bathroom, washing the blood off of his hands. With a single glance directly towards the camera (53:39), Frank situates the audience not only inside his home, but inside one of the most private rooms in his home, thus strengthening the impression of an intimate relationship between Frank and the viewer. These first couple of minutes of the episode manages to create a positive first impression of the show's main character, and although Frank's moral ambiguity is exposed before the end of the episode, this initial presentation of him as a moral and positive character is likely to stay with the audience. Arthur A. Raney (2004) explains how "the initial formation of an affective disposition towards a character may at times precede specific moral evaluations of the character" (p. 361). This scene allows the audience to form a positive and favorable judgment of his character early on, and is more likely to stick with that judgment and stay invested in Frank as a character, even as his moral ambiguity progresses into flat out immorality by the end of the season. Klarer (2014) argues how this introduction "in its cruelty, […] expounds the protagonist's main character trait of extreme loyalty to his own self-imposed and rather questionable principles" (p. 206).

Frank addresses the audience to give them an insight into his plans – rather than revealing his inner thoughts – and most importantly: to let them know he has one. Frank is a master manipulator and reverse psychology is one of his most used strategies to accomplish this. Another of Frank's abilities is convincing people to either take the blame for him, or to not blame him; this is presented to the audience in "Chapter 2" by Frank during a meeting with Donald Blythe, who wrote the first draft of the education bill, which Frank just leaked to the press in order to crush it. Donald is understandably distraught and unaware that the perpetrator is sitting in front of him. Frank confidently tells Blythe that he is ready to take the blame – "I'll fall on this grenade myself, just to piss them off" (39:41) – and picks up the phone to call John King at CNN. Pause. Now, the audience is well aware Frank is bluffing, but what exactly does he want to accomplish? He turns to the camera

and explains: "What a martyr craves more than anything is a sword to fall on. So you sharpen the blade, hold it at just the right angle, and then 3, 2, 1…" (39:19). Right on cue, Blythe replies: "It should be me" (39:09). Blythe is clearly uncomfortable with Frank's seeming martyrdom, and, therefore, takes the blame for the leak himself. Donald Blythe was an easy mark, and Frank is now in control of the education bill. He resisted about as much as the wounded dog in "Chapter 1", but this situation teaches the audience an important lesson - this first time the audience has witnessed Frank's use of reverse psychology, he explained exactly what he was doing, and how he was doing it. The next time, the audience is prepared; the sword is sharpened and Frank does not need to explain *what* he is doing – only *how* he angles the sword.

By now, the audience is used to and expects these asides, and Frank typically uses them to let the viewer in on his genuine intentions, almost making them co-conspirators. Therefore, it greatly affects the viewer when they are suddenly denied access to Frank's interiority. This happens for the first time in "Chapter 6", where Frank attends a TV debate with the head of the Teachers Union, Marty Spinella. Before the debate, Frank is as confident as ever but the debate turns out disastrous and Frank ultimately ends up humiliating himself on national television. Klarer (2014) argues that "after having accustomed the viewer to a narrative logic that makes the storyline intelligible through carefully placed asides, we are suddenly confronted with paradoxical actions by the protagonist that would require explanations via such asides" (p. 208). At this point, the audience has an intimate relationship with his character, and therefore trust this scenario to be a calculated strategy to deceive Spinella and lure him into a carefully set trap, to put the final nail in his coffin and end the strike. However, the television debate ends without the confident and self-assured commentary from Frank. The the audience is left to just observe, as he later watches countless replays of his own words having been turned into a viral dance mix (courtesy of the Internet), pondering just how much impact this failure has had on his reputation – and his pride. The viewer, once a trusted confidante, is left to their own hypothesizing on this narrative enigma until the end of the episode, where Frank's schemes and manipulations puts him back in control of the situation from where he is ultimately able to put the final coffin in Spinella's coffin. Up until now, the audience has been accustomed to Frank's lies and double-speak, but as his trusted co-conspirator, there has never been a doubt, that Frank has lied in his asides. The audience has functioned as his accomplice, but

by leaving them out during the nearly catastrophic incident at the debate, and not including them in the strategy and process (if there even was one), the viewer is left to wonder the true reliability of their trusted main character: is Frank playing them just as much as he is playing everyone else?

The viewer is put in this situation again at the beginning of season four after the third season left the Underwoods in an unstable situation, with Claire walking out on Frank. Chapter 40, the first episode of season four, presents Frank as being clearly affected by Claire's lack of presence. Frank does not directly address the viewer before the end of the second episode of the season, once again leaving them to their own hypothesizing and guessing. The absence of the asides is deafening, but as Frank slowly but surely returns in control, there are quick moments where Frank seems to almost address the audience, but then quickly looks away – almost as if he is teasing the audience. At the end of "Chapter 41" he finally feels enough control to address the viewer directly with a story from his childhood (12:04), effectively letting the audience know, how he will let Claire play her game but if she does not know when to quit, he will (masterfully discreet, of course) manipulate her into submission.

The use of the asides is crucial for the audience's attachment and alignment with Frank. Mittell (2015) notes the following on the character Walter White:

"As we learn about his cancer, his unfulfilling career, and his dire financial situation, we are fully attached to the character, sharing knowledge that he keeps secret from other characters, thus increasing our alignment" (p. 153)

This is the same case for Frank. Through the asides, Frank puts the viewer in the position of a confidante, one with whom he shares his intimate secrets and schemes – one who he can show his true colors. Frank has several good qualities: he is career-driven, great at networking, and his charisma and charming Southern accent combined with his love for barbeques portrays Frank as an immensely approachable man – like you could get a beer with him (or in this case, a plate of ribs). But it is ultimately the asides, which increases the viewer's alignment and and trust.

Besides explaining the plot and serving as guide-lines for Frank's true intentions, the asides (and maybe more importantly lack thereof) prove an important tool in the elaboration of his

character. Mittell (2015) discusses several forms of changes, fictional characters might go through and argues how "characters rarely shift significantly, but our perception of them does", a change he dubs "*character elaboration*" (p. 136). This specific notion is important, when discussing Frank Underwood, as there is no real transformation in his character through the four seasons. In contrast to a series such as *Breaking Bad*, which tells the story of the gradual demoralization of the main protagonist Walter White, Frank is already demoralized. That which in "Chapter 1" presents itself as moral ambiguity may at the end of the first season, with the murder of Peter Russo in "Chapter 11", have turned out to be flat out immorality but is it not really portrayed as a change in Frank's character, as much as an elaboration of his character – he is not *suddenly* now capable of murder, he is just *also* capable of murder. He is calm and collected in the car, setting up the fake suicide situation, and shows no sign of regret or feelings other than indifference.

Frank's background is gradually fleshed out during the series. In "Chapter 8", it is heavily implied that Frank used to be in a relationship with his old military school friend Tim Corbet. On the one hand, the introduction of Frank's 'sexual fluidity' adds to his list of redeeming qualities, portraying how Frank was "always so drawn" (21:35) to him and comfortable enough to act on it and while Frank's expressions of affection are usually manipulative and deceiving, the affection he felt towards Corbet felt genuine. This furthermore adds to the notion that Frank wants what he wants and takes what he wants, whatever the possible consequences, while additionally pointing to his and Claire's marriage seeming more like a business arrangement than a loving relationship.

As much as there is no real change in Frank's character, the events of season four showcase what might most resemble what Mittell (2015) calls "*character education*" (p. 138), as Frank realizes he cannot go on without Claire by his side. At the end of season three, Claire has grown weary of her assigned spot in the passenger's seat and walks out on Frank. He is clearly affected and distraught by the situation (heavily implied by his lack of commentary to the audience), but it is not before his trip to the hospital that he recognizes that he needs her by his side – or maybe even what she can accomplice without him. They say behind every great man is a great woman, but Claire Underwood stands behind no one, and by walking out on Frank, she cements her need for significance. While Frank is hospitalized, she spends little time sitting by his bed side and when Frank awakens and is brought up to speed, he seems to finally genuinely appreciate and respect Claire's hard work and significance in his rise to power. Especially now that he also lost Edward Meechum,

who was greatly important to him, Frank would truly be alone without Claire. This notion is ultimately cemented in the final few moments of season four: Frank, once again, looked to the camera and spoke to the viewer. "We don't submit to terror. We make the terror" (02:52). While stating this, he turns to Claire at his side, who reacts to his words, and in a significant twist, both of them turn their gaze directly towards the camera. Claire has never before broken the fourth wall, and this represents a fundamental shift in dynamics between them. Up until now, Frank has been in the most powerful position, the one in charge, but now he has finally recognized how integral Claire has been for achieving and maintaining their success. This shared break of the fourth wall represents shared control. For the first time, they are truly equal.

The Power of the Author

In regards to Frank's reliability, there are a particular interesting scene from season one's "Chapter 13", which plays further on the notion of trust between Frank and the audience. Frank is sitting in his office, waiting for the president to finish a meeting that will determine the success of Frank's master plan. He looks up at the clock above his desk. The camera – and by extension the audience – is placed inside the clock, behind the ticking hands. Frank asks: "You've never been an ally, have you?" (13:33), and for a brief moment, this comment seems to be directed at the audience – is Frank now blaming the breach of trust on the viewer? It quickly becomes clear, though, that Frank is talking about time, and he explains to the audience, how agonizing waiting can be. From the unusual perspective, the viewer has a great overview of Frank's desk and the content thereon. This includes a copy of *The Passage of Power*, the fourth installment of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon B. Johnson, which was released the year before. Now, this is a rather loaded product placement. Lyndon B. Johnson was a southern politician, a Texan democrat, who was known for his skillful manipulations. As the 36th president of the United States, he became an immensely powerful man in congress (LBJ: Biography, nd.). *The Passage of Power* documents Johnson's climb to the vice presidency and, following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the presidency. By this time, the audience is well aware, that Frank will do anything to get what he wants – even murder – but could the placement of this book indicate, that Frank is reading some kind of playbook? Is this foreshadowing season two? Given the audience's complicated relationship with Frank, there is no way of knowing, if he has put the book in frame as a friendly reading suggestion or if this is a rare

moment into the true character of Frank, unintended for the viewer's eyes. Going with the latter, this shot is a reminder for the audience, that there are several functions to Frank's asides. Yes, they explain the plot and serves as guide-lines for his true intentions, but they also help sculpting the viewer's impression of him. Frank is constantly ensuring that he is portrayed as a smart and savvy political strategist; however, if Frank fashions himself as Johnson, this suggests a new level of vulnerability. This portrays him not as a clever conspirator, but merely an aspirant, and even if the audience has pondered it before, they are now forced to consider, whether they, through the asides, are being manipulated by Frank, just as much as he has manipulated everyone in the diegetic world.

In regards to the notion of unreliable narration, Seymour Chatman (1990) has coined the term *implied author*, which de describes as "the overriding source of the story" (p. 131), thus the implied author functions as the overall creator and is responsible for the total design of the narrative(s). While Chatman describes the implied author as not part of the fictional world, Klarer (2014) argues the following for how Frank can be considered the implied author of *House of Cards*:

"The driving force behind all of [the] asides is to identify Frank Underwood as the author or creator of the unfolding action. Like the author of a text, he puts words in the mouths of characters as well as directs their actions as every good author or narrator would do" (p. 213)

With his manipulations, Frank creates a sense of importance regarding various character roles in his plans, only to dispose of them when they are no longer needed. Frank is responsible for Zoe's growing popularity and climb up the professional ladder, and the fate of Peter Russo has been in the hands of Frank the entire season. As a master puppeteer, Frank has created puppets around him to do his bidding and just like the implied author, he orchestrates his surroundings and manipulates the people around him to follow his own constructed narrative. Chatman (1990) has furthermore coined the term "cinematic narrator" which he defines as "the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices" (p. 134), including elements such as music, lighting, misè-en-scene etc. – all essential elements when determining the intrinsic norms of *House of Cards*. If the implied author is responsible for the design of the narrative, that makes the cinematic narrator the transmitter of the narrative, and not the creator. This also correlates with how the cinematic

narrator expresses Frank's version of the world. The underlying theme of power is visible and highlighted in the cinematography and the cinematic narrator seems to co-operate with Frank, in his ploy of winning over the audience and convincing them, that the Underwoods are the heroic protagonists of the series. Frank, as the implied author, is in control of the cinematic narrator and therefore in control of all the communicative devices and uses them to his own advantage to portray himself as the powerful creator.

When Push Comes to Shove

While much of serial television aims to make audience comprehension as easy as possible, complex television has increased the tolerance for confusion among their viewers and encourages them to pay close attention and make their own way to comprehend the narrative (Mittell, 2015, p. 164). *House of Cards* is definitely guilty of this strategy, and this section aims to take a closer look at exactly how they do it, by looking at the first episode of season two. The episode has been chosen for closer examination because, with a rating of 9.6, it is one of the highest rated episodes of the series on IMDB ("Chapter 14"). It is furthermore interesting to examine how the series welcomes the viewer back for the first time after a whole year (assuming the viewer binged the first season when it premiered). Additionally, this episode features both a surprising absence of fourth wall breaks from Frank and the unexpected murder of Zoe Barnes, Frank's second kill, which contrasts greatly to the murder of Peter Russo – but this will be discussed in more detail later. Let us first take a look at the different narrative devices.

Season two of *House of Cards* begins where season one left off – with Frank and Claire's jog. The opening sequence is completely devoid of any dialogue and aims the viewer's anticipation away from any plot questions and towards the emotional connection to the series. The dark of night, the sound of cars and a dog barking is reminiscent of the aforementioned "Chapter 1", where the viewer's first moments with the Underwoods also featured dogs and late nights. The sequence shows Frank and Claire literally running into focus and frame, taking a short pause to catch their breath and then continues, moving out of the frame. Besides creating a great amount of continuity across the seasons, this opening also function as a forewarning to the audience, that this season intends to race forwards from where season one ended.

House of Cards holds no one's hands as the series rush on with the narrative, and expects the viewer to pay attention and to keep up on their own. If the viewer tunes into season two for the first time, they will be presented with a 3 min. recap of season one. This is the only form of "previously on", the audience will be presented, as Netflix does not employ recaps, as traditional serial television does. Netflix's Content Chief, Ted Sarandos explains their reasoning behind the lack of recaps as follows:

> "We get this great luxury, that when an episode it written, that we assume, that you saw the one just before it, and we don't spend any time reminding you what happened last week, because it just happened, you just watched it, and that really gives you, you know, literally 15-20 minutes an hour that you're not spending doing exposition, or reminder, or artificial cliffhangers to get you tricked into next week, and you really do get more storytelling, and more richness, and by the time you get to 13 hours, you have spent more time with those people" ("Netflix shows don't need annoying recaps")

This notion is evident in the narrative and dialogue of the series. Frank's asides will from time to time function as exposition, giving the viewer a brief introduction to new characters, but the series spends little time bringing the viewer up to speed aside from this device, as they are expected to keep up on their own. From the first episode, the viewer has been taught to pay attention and focus on the subject at hand. The way *House of Cards* manages the information distribution serve to create narrative enigmas and develop curiosity among the audience, by letting different scenarios play out and only afterwards provide the audience with the needed information. While the viewer is granted access to Frank's interiority, they are left to make their own hypothesizing when it comes to the other characters. One who is particularly difficult to read is Claire. She seems to be as calculating and ruthless as her husband, but without the direct access to her interiority, her thoughts and motives are difficult to deduce. In "Chapter 14" she is shown at the doctor's office, looking for information on genetic testing and fertility drugs for post 40 pregnancies (25:05). Throughout season one, there have been hints at Claire hitting menopause, and this scene insinuates that she may be having second thoughts about not having children. However, in a later scene revealed that Claire only went to the clinic to gather information, so she could blackmail Gillian Cole out of a

lawsuit (18:42). Without direct access to Claire's inner thoughts, there is no guidelines for the audience's hypothesizing, and the reveal of the blackmail adds a new layer of comprehension to a previous scene, which intentions seemed clear. Claire makes her intentions completely clear, when she says: "I'm willing to let your child wither and die inside you" (18:36), but just as the audience is confident in their hypotheses, yet another layer is added. In the subsequent scene, Claire cancels all further appointments and tests at the clinic, and while this seems obvious, as it was all a ploy, Claire hesitates (17:39), and this prompts the question: was it really *just* a trick?

As mentioned, one of the series' established intrinsic norms is the continuous fourth wall breaking. Mittell (2015) argues how serial television can play with these norms to "create pleasurable moments of confusion, surprise, and twisty trickery" (p. 168), and this is exactly what happens in "Chapter 14" with the aforementioned absence of the aside. At this point in the series, the viewer has been accustomed to being Frank's accomplice and co-conspirator, but Frank starts the second season off with deafening silence. Not until the episode's last scene, does he address the audience directly. This absence of the asides serves two functions. Firstly, it highlights the strength of the storytelling and cements how the audience benefits from the added exposition and intimate relationship with Frank. As the viewer is downgraded to the benches, watching from the side, they are reminded how important the fourth wall breaks are, as they spend the episode waiting for clues, anticipating and hypothesizing Frank's thoughts and actions – who is this Jackie Sharp and is Frank truly interested in Jackie taking over as Whip or is she just another pawn? And for just how long has he been planning Zoe's murder - a scenario which will be discussed further in the next paragraph. By now, the audience has gotten so used to Frank's explanations and snarky comments, they are positively lost without them. Frank's lack of confiding in the audience portrays just how dependent they are on their relationship with him – something Frank wants to cement, as he shows his true colors. He effectively showing his dominance and power over the viewer. Secondly, it serves as a reminder for the viewer that Frank is an enigma of his own, maybe even the greatest enigma, and he remains true to only himself. He might let the viewer play the part of intimate confidante, but as this serves to remind them, it is only on Frank's own terms, as everything else in *House of Cards.*

Bordwell (2007) describes how "*Curiosity* stems from past events: what led up to what we're seeing now? *Suspense* points us forwards: what will happen next? *Surprise* foils our expectations and demands that we find an alternative explanation for what happened" (p. 16). With the murder of Zoe, *House of Cards* turns the traditional model of surprise and suspense known from television around. This murder is also in great contrast to the murder of Peter Russo in season one, which slowly followed the model for suspense. As a contrast to Zoe, Peter was from the beginning portrayed as having little control over his life and his addictions, while Zoe, low on *The Herald* food chain she might be, is portrayed as a resourceful go-getter. Even before he got swept up in Frank's schemes, Peter was practically useless – and as Frank let the viewer know in "Chapter 1", he has "no patience for useless things" (55:23). This is how the audience knows that when Peter has outlived his usefulness, he will be put down just as the dog in "Chapter 1". Frank spends the rest of season one building him up, only to knock him down again for his own gain. When Frank places the razorblade (a razorblade that has effectively been on the mantel since "Chapter 2") by Peter's side in "Chapter 6", telling him to "cut along the tracks, not across them." (04:20), there is no doubt anymore. This scene effectively foreshadows the murder, as Frank by the end of the season will once again have manufactured Peter's suicide and the audience is merely left waiting for clues as to when this will happen. The murder of Zoe, on the other hand, abruptly pulls the audience out of their comfort zone. Most of "Chapter 14" seem to indicate a continued partnership between Zoe and Frank, as they meet and discuss this very topic – "Let's start this chapter with a clean slate", Frank says. This notion is backed up by the trailer for the season, as this paratext insinuates that Zoe is featured through the majority of the season – or at least until after Frank officially takes the Vice Presidency. Adding to this thought is the amount of press Katie Mara did for the season, the cast and crew did a great job concealing this surprise. The murder of Zoe is a surprising and shocking twist of a size that is usually reserved for and befitting season finales. This twist of the model is additionally portrayed quite literally on the screen, as Frank grabs Zoe, spins her 180 degrees and shoves her out in front of the train (13:04). The action is surprising and sudden and with tricky foreshadowing. Earlier in the episode, Freddie tells Frank about different ways to slaughter pigs: a slow and torturous method and a quick and humane method (21:06). This is clearly foreshadowing something, even the least attentive viewer can figure that out, but while the dog from "Chapter 1" was foreshadowing for Frank putting Peter out of his misery (even though he manufactured the

misery) many episodes later, this events hits within 10 minutes of the same episode. Even though the audience was expecting something happening to Zoe, it hit them before they had time to prepare themselves. Another tiny flicker of foreshadowing an attentive viewer could pick up is Frank wanting a "fresh start" (20:10) with Zoe – the same phrase he used for Peter's campaign. The murder of Zoe furthermore provides an answer for why Frank, earlier in the episode, refused the extra security before he was officially named Vice President – he had a loose end to tie before security amped up. *House of Cards* was building up suspense for the audience, as they knew something was in the works for Zoe, but as Peter's storyline lasted a whole season, Zoe's was expected to also. However, without the trusted running commentary from Frank, they were left guessing, unable to prepare for the surprise murder at the end of the episode.

House of Cards employs little to none narrative devices, such as flashbacks, dream sequences, etc. – until season four. In a surprising twist, season four features several of Frank's dream sequences and hallucinations while he is in the hospital. The hallucinations offer access to character interiority while Frank is unable to provide that himself, and they offer maybe the most in-depth view of Frank's character yet, as it is seemingly an uncompromised and true look into Frank's psyche. He sees civil war soldiers, foggy woods and in the Oval Office he is additionally joined by his past victims, Zoe and Peter, who helped him get there. While it could be argued how these are just images of Frank's life, flashing before his eyes as he lies dying in the hospital bed, there is something almost apocalyptic over them, as if his sins are catching up to him – could this mean, that the end of the Underwoods is near? The doctor tending to Frank argues that the hallucinations are caused by his failing liver, but if, as Klarer argues, Frank is indeed the implied author of *House of Cards*, he himself would be in control of these images. Frank is used to using his words and telling the audience, what he is thinking, and in these sequences he is showing them – but to what purpose? Frank has spent the entire series protecting his persona as ruthless and calculating and now he is all of a sudden in possession of a consciousness, and he is willingly letting the audience know? This could hint at a shift in the dynamic in the relationship with the viewer. Just as Claire is finally his equal – so is the audience. Maybe it is just another technique to manipulate the audience into regarding him as more humane than before. At this point in the series, Frank's reputation is hanging by a thread, and the hallucinations could be Frank's way of gaining the viewer's confidence one more, by not only telling them, but showing them with powerful imagery how much he repents his

previous actions. Furthermore, the ending of season four heavily hints that season five will portray Frank as even more monstrous than before – the hallucinations could be Frank needing to ensure the viewer's allegiance before fully unleashing his inner monster. Whatever the reason, it will be immensely interesting going into the next season.

Discussion

Netflix and Binge

With the technological developments and changes in distribution, the introduction and rise of different video-on-demand (VOD) services has lead to drastic changes in consumer behavior. William Trouleau et al. (2016) argues how these changes has led to "the rise of binge watching, where multiple TV episodes, and potentially entire seasons, are consumed in a single setting." (para. 1). The rhythm of the traditional flow TV forced the audience to accommodate their schedule around their favorite TV series, usually waiting a week for a new episode, spending months watching an entire season, but Netflix embraced this new and growing tendency among the audience with the release of *House of Cards* (Klingenberg et al., 2014, p. 43). Netflix's user interface is customized to this viewing habit, binge-watching, with different technological tricks to maintain the viewer's focus, and the format of the platform is therefore hugely important when discussing this phenomenon. When an episode is finished, Netflix automatically starts a countdown of 15 seconds (the countdown varies depending on what device the viewer is using – tablet, computer, etc.), before the next episode begins, hereby reducing the former waiting time from a week to mere seconds. Klingenberg-Nielsen et al. (2014) discuss how this forces the viewer to actively deselect continuing to watch the series and the short interruption does not affect the viewer experience as much, as a week's wait would do, giving the audience a coherent experience with the fictional world (p. 43). Netflix support the notion of one long story, as the viewer is free to click one button and start the next episode immediately. One could even argue that by turning the time code on its head (counting down instead of up), every episode is essentially counting down to the next. A part of the traditional structure of television series is to include a recap of the previous episodes ("Previously on…") before the title sequence and the opening of the series (Mittell 2015, 187). Other television series include a cold opening with a short intro to the events of the episode, or sometimes even a quick scene with no relevance for the subsequent events. This is commonly utilized in TV shows such as *Friends*, where the cold opening sets up the plot for the episode. As a result of the format of the platform, *House of cards* does not employ recaps, which supports the notion of one story. Besides a summary of the last 13 episodes when first tuning in to a new season, the audience is expected to pay attention and keep up on their own. Furthermore, the timing of the title sequence varies from episode to episode – sometimes it is the first element to show up on the screen,

sometimes the episodes includes a cold opening. As Netflix is not dependent on a specific set time and schedule as traditional broadcast television is, the platform allows them not to care about triggering the viewer's memory with these recaps, as they have most likely just watched the previous episode and therefore does not need their memory triggered.

Another important factor when discussing binging, is the text itself. Narratively complex television series demand a certain of level of attention from the viewer, making it necessary for the viewer to make a conscious decision to devote their focus entirely to the series. This is only possible, if the audience is able to schedule their time autonomously. Mittell (2010) argues the following:

"Complex comedies like *Arrested Development* encourage the freeze-frame power of DVDs to catch split-second visual gags and pause the frantic pace to recover from laughter. These televisual strategies are all possible via scheduled flow, but greatly enhanced by viewing multiple times via published DVDs. Having control of when and how you watch also helps deepen one of the major pleasures afforded by complex narratives: the operational aesthetic."

The complex nature of the narrative in *House of Cards* demands the focus and attention of the audience, and the intertwining plots and storylines creates a seamless continuity throughout the season, which only seem to encourage binge-watching to get the full effect. Another element which allows for more complex narrative is the technological changes and developments, which provide the audience with the possibility to click pause and rewind. Mittell (2015) argues how the complex narratives are designed for the viewer to not only pay very close attention but also to "rewatch in order to notice the depth of references, to marvel at the display of craft and continuities, and to appreciate details that require the liberal use of pause and rewind" (p. 38). The creators are free to create even more complex narratives, as the technology allows the viewer to easily pay close attention.

Netflix has recently released what they call "the Netflix binge-scale" (Netflix & Binge), a survey on their subscribers and their viewing habits. Netflix' Vice President of Original Content Cindy Holland explains that the scale, which ranges from *devour* to *savor*, "indicates [that] the viewing experience can range from the emotional to the thought-provoking" (Netflix & Binge).

Unsurprisingly, the series ranked highest on the 'devour' end are thrillers, horror and sci-fi shows – genres which generate a lot of suspense and emotional responses. The list featured titles such as *Dexter* (2006), *American Horror Story* (2011) and *Orphan Black* (2013). The 'savor' end featured the more thought-provoking dramas and "irreverent comedies" (Netflix & Binge), such as *Arrested Development* (2003). *House of Cards* is also found on this end of the scale, along with other political and historical dramas such as *The West Wing* (1999) and *Mad Men* (2007). While the novel and movie like structure of *House of Cards* definitely encourages binge-watching, the complexity of the narrative and characters seemingly leaves the viewer in need of breaks to catch their breath.

Platform and Format

The format of Netflix provides creators with brand new possibilities for the narrative structure of series. House of Cards features several elements, which draws parallels between the structure of the series and the structure or a movie or novel. David Fincher comments the following on these analogies:

"And it's crazy. It's like a book. It's like you reading a chapter, set it down. Go get some Thai food, come back, fire it up again. It works in a different way. The pace of consumption in some way informs a kind of relationship that you have with the characters, which is very different from destination television. Or you know the ("I Love Lucy" rerun) at 7:30 at Tuesday nights." (Sepinwall, 2013)

The parallels between the structure of *House of Cards* and the novel and movie is further accentuated by the titles of the episode – "Chapter 1", "Chapter 2", etc. – with which the series itself calls to attention the structural overlap between television and novel: just as a novel with numerous chapters can be read at the viewer's own preference, *House of Cards* can be consumed in the viewer's own time (Klarer, 2014, p. 215). Another element which adds to the comparison between *House of Cards* and the novel can be found in Netflix's user interface. If the viewer is interrupted or decides to take a break in the middle of an episode or movie – even if they turn the service completely off – they will be presented with the exact spot, they paused the film when they left it. This function even with several different movies or series at the same time. Whenever the

audience stops a viewing of something and picks it up again at a later time – days, weeks, months later – Netflix start the viewing at the exact time, they left it; just as if the viewer had left a bookmark in a novel.

As in Fincher's musings above, 'binge-reading' is not a new phenomenon – there have always been people reading an entire book in one sitting – as have there been people preferring to read only one chapter at a time. Derek Kompare (2006) argues how the terms by which the viewer consummates the text are moving away form a broadcasting and towards a publishing model:

> "People have long been regarded in media studies as "spectators", "viewers", and "audiences", but much less so as "users", "consumers", and "collectors". As the expansions of home video markets, the continued merging of media industries, and the significant technological changes of the early twenty-first century indicate, the latter categories are claiming precedence in industry rhetoric and everyday experience" (p. 353)

As Kompare indicates, as it has always been with the publication of novels, the change of models switches the control of consummation from the publisher to the viewer. This publishing model allows viewers with access to DVD sets or downloaded files to mimic the consummation of books, as they are able to consult earlier episodes or seasons. This model hereby greatly enhances the structural possibilities of storytelling by letting Netflix create shows specifically aimed at this format and thus breaks with the traditions of the classic structure of television. *House of Cards* has merged elements from traditional television, film, and the novel into a hybrid, which disassociates itself from the boundaries of categorization and focuses solely on the narrative.

Another interesting element to add to the discussion of narrative is the rules and restrictions traditional television is assigned to. Broadcast television have strict rules to follow, as there are rigorous regulations as for what can be shown on national television. As mentioned, as a Netflix series, *House of Cards* are not bound by the same restrictions as cable television, and are able to use this to their storytelling advantages. Although significantly less than its cable counterpart, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards* feature graphic sex, nudity and smoking – elements used to further flesh out the characters or to advance storylines. In "Chapter 9", Frank quotes Oscar Wilde, saying

"a great man once said, everything is about sex. Except sex. Sex is about power" (05:44), a quote, which is definitely true when discussing *House of Cards*. Throughout the series, rather than a portrayal of love and intimacy, sex is depicted mostly as the means to an end – a bargaining chip or act of violence, as sex in *House of Cards* really is about power (e.g. the power struggle between Zoe and Frank). Simultaneously, the seemingly lack of sex within the Underwood marriage arguably might be the most compassionate and warmest story arc of the series, as it is clearly shown how, while they might seek outside their marriage for physical satisfaction, there is without a doubt a deep intimate bond between the pair, symbolized by the nightly cigarette. Depending on the eyes of the viewer, Frank's fluid sexuality and the openness of their marriage can both act to further complicate and humanize the characters, or simply cement the characters as a power hungry sociopathic couple who prioritizes power over passion. Smoking is another element *House of Cards* is able to use to advance the characters and their relationship, as the nightly cigarette Claire and Frank share is vital to the symbolization of their relationship. Prime-time broadcast television generally does not show lead characters smoking cigarettes. Criminals, villains and generally untrustworthy characters will occasionally smoke (an example could be Cigarette Smoking Man, main villain on *The X-Files* (1993)), main characters on television is rarely seen indulging (Gildemeister, 2008). Although the nightly cigarette furthers the portrayal of the Underwoods as villains, these situations are the most intimate moments of their relationship. It is also worth noting how, after they move to the White House in season three, the shared nightly cigarette stops – just as their marriage begins to deteriorate.

With the platform of Netflix, the viewer is in complete control of their own viewing habits. While broadcast television requires the audience to tune in at specific times and days regardless of the viewer's own schedule, Netflix allows them to watch television at any time or place, hereby ensuring they never miss an episode. This change in viewer habits allows Netflix to create more complex series with more depth than broadcast television, as they are not bound by the same narrative structure. With the different narrative structure, *House of Cards* can for example afford to dedicate whole episodes to character development, as the main storyline in "Chapter 8", where Frank visits his alma mater exists purely for adding character depth. The technological developments combined with the changes in distribution allows Netflix to create television aimed

at the attentive and observant viewer, who takes an active role in comprehending the narrative and who wants to be challenged to keep up.

Netflix and *House of Cards* in the Post-Network Era

Lotz' definition of the post-network era functions as a jumping off point for a discussion of the narrative of current television. Though technically situated within the post-network era, Lotz hesitates to include Netflix in her definition of the era for the following reasons:

> "The realities of television economics and the fact that Netflix – at this point in a quintessential middleman – owned neither content beyond a handful of shows nor the connection into the home made apparent that Netflix was unlikely to overtake those who produced content or could deliver to audiences, but it could force a revolution on those who did" (2014, p. 70-71)

However, at this point in time, Netflix has nearly 100 original series featured on their service (Netflix & Binge), and as Lotz in a later article has noted how internet subscribers has surpassed cable subscribers (Lotz, 2015), it seems safe to argue, that Netflix finally is a part of the post-network era.

There are several important aspects of the post-network era – one of them is advertising. From the early days of radio, the relationship between advertisers and networks has gone through many changes, and Lotz (2014) notes how product placement and integrations has become a major part of the television medium in the Post-Network era: "Though many examples of paid, unpaid, basic and advanced placement appeared across the networks throughout the early twenty-first century, these techniques mostly supplemented rather than replaced thirty-second advertisements" (p. 188). It is interesting to discuss advertising in regards to *House of Cards*, as the series is solely financed by Netflix and therefore has no direct sponsors. Furthermore, it does not feature the 30 second advertisements, as is required with network television, and is therefore not obligated to build the narrative structure around these commercial breaks. It does, however, feature a large amount of product placement, mainly a fairly large amount of apple products. The series' credits offer no disclosures of any product placement they may benefit from – so why the use of unpaid product placement? Lotz (2014) argues how it is a relationship of convenience:

"In the case of unpaid placement, or what Twitchell refers to as "product subventions", companies donate products needed on the set for reasons of verisimilitude – if a scene takes place in the kitchen, that set needs to be dressed with products that make it recognizable as a kitchen." (p. 187)

In the case of *House of Cards*, which features the White House as one of the series' main locations, the series appeals to the notion among the audience that Apple products equals technological sophistication – of course all of the politicians would use Apple products, as they are the most cutting edge products on the market. As advertising has changed with the post-network era, Mareike Jenner (2014) argues that Netflix is not subject to the 'traditional' rules of advertisement and markets their own services to subscribers, rather than advertisers (p. 6). However, by offering a large amount of creative and budgetary freedom to television auteurs and hiring big-profile actors and producers (as Kevin Spacey and David Fincher), Netflix follows HBO's example and creates their brand identity on quality content (Jenner, 2014, p. 7). By promoting their content through a famous auteur, Netflix legitimizes their television serials to an audience who would otherwise seek to movies to fulfill their need for entertainment. In the case of *House of Cards*, Fincher has only directed the first two episodes, but by linking their content to the high profile director, Netflix seems to be adapting marketing strategies from the film industry, which is more oriented towards the director, than the writer or producer. The utilization of this branding strategy, and the employment of several directors for the series gives House of Cards an artistic and creative seal of approval, additionally linking it to the film industry.

The narrative in *House of Cards* is furthermore an example of the changes in practices which interconnect to expand the range of stories that could be profitably told on U.S. television, and additionally points to implications of this expanded storytelling field for the industry and the culture (Lotz, 2014, p. 19). But in order for a series to fit under Lotz' definition of the post-network era "the majority of the audience" (Lotz, 2014, p. 10) would need to have entered the post-network era by using the opportunities new technologies and industrial practices make available, and as studies from early 2014 shows (Lotz, 2014, p. 8-9), that has not yet happened. However, Lotz does note,

that the dominance of the Post-Network Era seems inevitable (2014, p. 10) and it can therefore be argued that Netflix as of 2014 fits within the Post-Network era, but in the sense that is does not rely on conventional programming distribution and as a platform caters to more viewer control. However, as Netflix's subscriber count has increased by approximately 43 million in the last decade, and as their membership base now covers most of the world, it could furthermore be argued that these 50 million subscribers counts as "the majority of the audience" (Lotz, 2014, p. 10), and Netflix therefore has evolved and grown to fit the description of the post-network era.

In the first edition of *Television will be revolutionized*, Lotz (2007) notes five keywords which have defined the post-network era: choice, control, convenience, customization, and community (p. 245). These five concepts are all still very much relevant today, as they all relate to new viewing habits and the greater access to a larger selection of content the audience can consume on their own time and schedule. Netflix caters directly to the new viewing habits of their audience and the platform offers a large collection of content (according to The Atlantic, Netflix has more than 76,000 categories of TV series and movies available in their online library) (Madrigal, 2014), making it possible for the viewer to customize their own entertainment experience. At the Guardian Edinburgh International Film Festival, Kevin Spacey delivered a speech on the Netflix model, and he commented the following:

"Clearly the success of the Netflix model, releasing the entire season of *House of Cards* at once, proved one thing: The audience wants the control. They want the freedom. If they want to binge as they've been doing on House of Cards and a lot of other shows, we should let them binge. […] And through this new form of distribution, we have demonstrated that we have learned the lesson, that the music industry didn't learn: Give people what they want, when they want it, in the form they want it in, at a reasonable price, and they'll more likely pay for it than steal it." (Smith, 2013)

Giving the audience what they want is clearly the key to success in the new age of entertainment and television and the Netflix does exactly that. With their platform and format, the streaming service embodies Lotz's five C's and their success has proved a challenge to the television

industry, forcing them to changes their ways by giving the consumers more flexibility, if they want to keep them.

Conclusion

From the analysis, it is clear how the different production and distribution schedule surrounding *House of Cards* has had an impact on the series' narrative structure. As Netflix is not restricted by the same schedule as broadcast television, they are able to create series' structured by the assumption that the audience will watch several episodes, if not a whole season, in one setting. This assumption is further noticeable in the narrative structure, as there are few memory cues for the audience, and the series spends little to no time catching them up between episodes – they are expected to do that on their own.

The format and structure of *House of Cards* fits Mittell's theory of complex television. The series seems to integrate narrative techniques both from traditional television and the novel: *House of Cards* utilizes an embodied narrator figure traditionally found in literature – the first person narrator. The aside, though it has strong ties to traditional drama, is furthermore strongly related to the novel and it seamlessly combined with the traditional filmic narrative techniques and incorporated in the narrative structure. By employing the narrative tradition of the literary novel while simultaneously breaking from the traditional television serial format and narrative conventions, *House of Cards*' use of narrator, author, and character places the series within Mittell's theory and furthermore matches the changes within the television industry in Lotz's definition of the Post-Network era. By combining traditional filmic storytelling devices and drawing on that of the traditional novel with the incorporation of the aside, *House of Cards* sets itself aside from the traditional format and structure, merging the different narrative structures into a complex narrative structure, fit for the new online serial format and audience.

Lotz' defining C's of the post-network era (choice, control, convenience, customization, and community) can be linked directly to the platform and format of Netflix and thus places the service within the Post-Network era. The streaming service offers a platform fit for contemporary television which matches today's need for selectivity. The platform offers a large amount of creative freedom for auteurs and the format enables complex narrative structure of series like *House of Cards*. Many of the critically acclaimed series of the past decade have adapted this novel-like narrative structure as model for success – *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Dexter*– and Netflix has followed in the footsteps of this trend with the structure and format of *House of Cards*. However, with the full season releases of their original series, Netflix challenges the narrative structure of broadcast television series, as

they do not have to cater to the weekly schedule, but instead offers (and encourages) their subscribers the opportunity to binge several episodes, or even the entire season, in one sitting. With other streaming services following the same pattern with original content (e.g. Amazon Instant Video's *Transparent* (2014)), the successful format and platform of Netflix has challenged and influenced the television industry. At the 67th Emmy Awards in 2015, *Transparent* was nominated for Most Outstanding Comedy Series along with Netflix's own *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015) and both *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* were nominated for Most Outstanding Drama Series. Thus, it is clear that Netflix not only has influenced and revolutionized the industry with their platform and format, but they are clearly also a serious contender with their successful original content, consequently creating a loyal user base and brand identity that equals quality content. In their long-term view, Netflix claims that within the next 20 years "Internet TV will replace linear" (Netflix's View, 2016). While Netflix may not necessarily be the market leader in streaming services two decades from now, at the time being they are a pioneer in the era of entertainment television and seem to have irrevocably changed the industry.

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