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Derrida and The Future of Complex Narrative Television

By

Callum Woolley

Master of Arts

Film and Media Studies

____

Daniel Reynolds, Ph.D. Advisor

____

Michele Schreiber, Ph.D. Committee Member

____

Matthew Bernstein, Ph.D. Committee Member

Accepted:

____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D. Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

____

Date

Derrida and The Future of Complex Narrative Television

By

Callum Woolley
B.A., University of St Andrews, 2015

Advisor:
Daniel Reynolds, Ph.D.

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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ABSTRACT

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By Callum Woolley

The school of thought known as deconstruction is conspicuous by its absence in film and media theory. This thesis applies the work of its chief proponent, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, to a uniquely modern type of text: complex narrative television. This paradigm brings to light, among other features, the structural apparatus working beneath a text - often bearing a technique known as the operational aesthetic. The operational aesthetic identifies textual structures; deconstruction uses textual structures to uncover meaning in a text. How can deconstructivist concepts be used to interpret complex narrative television, and what does an analysis reveal? This thesis employs the operational aesthetic in concert with Derrida's logocentrism - the notion that there exists a hierarchy in language between speech and writing. Using the Netflix series, *House of Cards*, as a base text, Chapter 1 addresses specific moments in the show in which the narrative of speech and writing "betray" or invert themselves. Chapter 2 examines the show's trademark 'direct address' technique used across episodes or seasons which I argue, like individual moments, exposes a chasm in the narrative between speech and writing. My conclusion draws briefly on further televisual complex narrative texts and situates the analysis in the previous sections within a pattern that I argue is occurring throughout much of modern complex television. Overall, I demonstrate that deconstruction as applied to an audiovisual text yields a greater understanding of the term 'narrative complexity' and the ways in which the paradigm is evolving.

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INTRODUCTION

Toward a Deconstruction of Speech and Writing in Complex Narrative Television

The intersection between philosophy and what has come to be known as film and media studies has, since at least the inception of film as an artistic medium, been the subject of intense debate. This debate found a polemical voice in the writing of several French philosophers during the years in which Andre Bazin's *Cahiers du Cinéma* exerted its greatest cultural influence. Thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou strayed often from their primary subjects in philosophy into discussions of cinema and its essence. They asked such questions as: if cinema is to be taken seriously as an art form, how do we begin to understand its function? How - or why - does a film instill in us emotions in a way distinct from that of, for instance, painting or photography? The corpus of these writers and their philosophical questioning are often associated with the movements of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Postwar French philosophy corresponds with the existentialism articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). The ideologies and practices associated with poststructuralism signaled a conscious move away from existentialist philosophy and towards a methodology that saw the text as its core subject, more so than the human. Integral to the formation and subsequent articulation of both poststructuralism and postmodernism is the school of thought known as 'deconstruction,'

pioneered most forcefully by Jacques Derrida. As a French philosopher writing at the same time as both Deleuze and Badiou, however, Derrida is noticeably silent in the realm of film and media studies. As Timothy Holland has remarked, the general interdisciplinarity of Derrida's writing highlights an interest in cinema's ancillary fields: music, photography, literature; and yet, surprisingly, we find very few references to film in Derrida's work (Holland 2015).

When *Cahiers* eventually published their interview with Derrida in 1998, the writers Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse prefaced the article by writing: "It is not obvious that a journal such as *Cahiers du cinéma* would interview Jacques Derrida. Above all because, for a long time, Derrida seemed to be interested only in the phenomenon of writing, in its trace, in speech." There are at least two assumptions present in this idea. The first is that a prolific philosopher with little or no direct writing about cinema is not of interest to readers of a popular film journal. To the editors of the *Cahiers* at the time, this may have indeed been true. The second assumption, however, is that a preoccupation with the "phenomenon of writing" is somehow incompatible or exclusive of an interest in cinematic studies. This claim is much less convincing.

The following thesis is grounded in the argument that an interest in the relationship between speech and writing and visual texts are not, as de Baecque and Jousse imply, mutually exclusive. I will argue that, when applied to a cinematic text, Derrida's concept of logocentrism - the notion that speech is superior to writing in language - can reveal fruitful insights into the nature of contemporary visual texts, specifically what has come to be called complex narrative television.

I shall begin the analysis in this thesis with two scenes in the series that trace, with varying styles, the act of writing a letter. In Chapter 1, I posit the claim that the relationship between speech and writing in both letter-writing scenes is more complex than what is explicitly communicated to us - that a logocentric reading unearths a depth to the narrative that speaks to

the theme of power on a formal, as well as narrative level. In other words, there is a complexity that is partially exposed by certain narrative events, such as a direct address, or a handwritten letter on a scrap piece of paper, that can be unmasked by a logocentric analysis. Such a claim forms the argumentative basis for Chapter 2, in which the analysis focuses on different moments in the narrative - such as the direct address - that underlie what Mittell terms the operational aesthetic at work in the complex narrative.

Poststructuralism, as defined here, seeks the identification and subsequent deconstruction of structures or fragments within a text that not only reveal textual meaning but also the narrative as an intricate construct. This idea of the text as a construct features the presence of the operational aesthetic: a narrative technique used to bring to light the textual apparatus.

The visual text in question is the US remake of the popular British television series, *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, Netflix, 2013). *House of Cards* will be used as an example of what Jason Mittell labels "complex narrative television" (Mittell 2006). As a series that employs a unique approach to narrative, production and distribution, *House of Cards* provides a contemporary example of a serialized televisual text against which we can test Derrida's deconstructivist ideas of logocentrism as elaborated in his book, *Of Grammatology* (1967).

Why television, and why *House of Cards* in particular? While discussions of filmic texts are generally absent in Derrida's work, there have been several (albeit limited) forays into film criticism using Derridean techniques. The most well-known is Peter Brunette and David Wills' book *Screen/Play*, in which they explore the genesis of Derrida's thought in film studies, pointing to the ways in which deconstruction has been used in criticism to uncover tropes and meanings pertaining to psychology and feminism (Brunette 1989). Yet, in Brunette and Wills and beyond, there is little reference to Derrida in television studies. One notable exception is

Christian Borrebye Bjering and Isak Winkel Holm's article 'The Dora Lange Archive: Derrida Watches *True Detective*,' which fuses the Derridean notion of the archive to a modern complex narrative (a piece I discuss in more detail below). The general absence of Derrida in television studies, then, let alone in film studies, motivates in part the analysis in this thesis.

However, my motivation goes beyond an attempt to fill a void in scholarship. A logocentric reading of *House of Cards* not only reveals a troubled relationship between speech and writing in a single complex narrative, but suggests a trend informing multiple modern television shows and the ways in which they are made (part of a phenomenon Kevin McDonald terms the 'Netflix effect') (McDonald 2016). *House of Cards* - a series born of algorithms pointing to consumer data that showed a desire for a political drama starring Kevin Spacey.

My analysis in this thesis operates on two levels. At the micro level (Chapter 1), I analyze specific moments in *House of Cards* in which the narrative of speech "betrays" or inverts itself. At the macro level (Chapter 2), I examine the trademark 'direct address' technique used across episodes or seasons which I argue exposes a chasm in the narrative between speech and writing. Finally, in my conclusion, I will consider the ways in which the show exhibits traits that can be said to be facets of complexity in modern television narratives as a whole. The first two levels of analysis mark a movement from the specific to the broad. The isolated moments in which the narrative exposes what Derrida calls "symptomatic" points will inform a reading that allows us to pinpoint and understand more fully those recurring expressions of power found in the direct address, which is a distinguishing feature of *House of Cards*. Having undertaken the analysis in these two chapters, we will be in a better position to view our findings as exemplary of a pattern that is occurring throughout much of modern complex television. Whether it is the hyper-reflexivity of a show like *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, Netflix, 2016), the unprecedented

opulence of *The Crown* (Peter Morgan, Netflix, 2016), or the foray into what Kristin Thompson calls "art television" in *The Young Pope* (Paolo Sorrentino, HBO, 2016), I argue that a Derridean reading of complex television demonstrates that the latter's boundaries continue to be molded and remolded with the release of shows that self-consciously challenge our expectations of the medium.

i. *Complex Narrative Television*

Complex television is a nascent paradigm in visual storytelling that has significantly altered conventional televisual narrative practices over the past three decades. This shift has brought about the phenomenon that scholars - most notably Jason Mittell - have termed "complex narrative television" (Mittell 2006). Mittell singles out several key traits that identify this shift. These include: a redefinition of the boundary between serial and episodic forms, the employment of devices that call attention to the narrative 'structures' undergirding the text, and a level of "audience engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness" (Mittell 2015). Mittell's seminal essay, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,' unpacks the idea of complexity that has come to be associated with modern premium serialized television, drawing on the work of scholars such as Jeffrey Sconce to inform his method of analysis (Sconce 2004). Therefore, while Mittell is not the only scholar to write about the increasing sophistication of televisual narrative form and content, his sustained scholarship on the subject (spanning 20 years) and his systematic approach (consistently drawing on an array of disciplines including narratology and reception studies to inform his writing) provide a good starting point for this study.

In 'Narrative Complexity', Mittell argues that complexity is signaled by a "redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration," though "not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance" (Mittell 2006). An example of this phenomenon is Joel Surnow's serial crime thriller *24* (Fox, 2001-2010). This popular series oscillates between self-sufficient episodic narratives that are completed in the allotted time-frame of an episode, such as the fifth episode in the third season in which Chloe (Mary Lynn Rajskub) unwittingly stumbles onto Jack's (Kiefer Sutherland) drug problem, and subplots that are serialized across multiple episodes (Mittell 2015). In addition, novel techniques in television used to generate, for example, the feeling of adrenaline or mystery (through frame composition and lighting) in *24* came to the fore, Mittell argues, during the 1990s via shows such as the *X-Files* (Carter, Chris, Fox, 1993-2002), inaugurating what he sees as the dawn of complex narrative television (Mittell 2006).

It is interesting to compare Mittell's 2006 essay with his analysis of complexity in 2015. He states in *Complex TV* (2015) that in the past 15 years, television's storytelling possibilities have undergone further "drastic shifts specific to the medium" (Mittell 2015). What was once seen as a risky narrative device, such as an unanticipated jump in the narrative chronology or an allusion to potentially controversial real life events (such as the 'ICO' hostage situation in the fourth season of *House of Cards*), is now seen as cliché. Recent successful shows such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (Benioff, David, HBO, 2011), exhibit atypical narrative devices to both engage and shock the viewer. In this wildly popular fantasy drama, sophisticated visual effects in battle scenes (most notably in the penultimate episode of the sixth season, 'Battle of the Bastards') and certain narrative twists (such as the routine killing off of central characters without anticipation) are designed to disturb the narrative flow and facilitate a fan-based dialogue on social media.

Mittell touches on the tendency in modern drama to oscillate between events that carry over into multiple episodes and those which are contained within the single episode. By purposefully making certain developments in the narrative obscure, such as the unexplained rivalries between certain characters in *Game of Thrones*, the viewer is left to piece together portions of the storyline from previous episodes. The audience's need to connect the dots is a feature of modern serialized narratives which, as we shall see, is crucial to their overall complexity. Mittell notes that narrative complexity "foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" by rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that "typifies conventional episodic form" (Mittell 2015). The underlying assumption is that the series is a cumulative narrative "that builds over time," instead of resetting back to a steady equilibrium at the end of every episode (Mittell 2015).

To better understand complexity in narrative television we can briefly explore the process under which these devices are identified and sought out by the viewer. As showrunners and writers experiment with narrative (such as in the mostly dialogue-free tenth episode in season four of *Buffy*, 'Hush' (1999)) the spectator is called upon to dissect or 'suss out' the techniques at play in the story. The pilot for *House of Cards*, like many pilots, shows off the tone of a show in a markedly more forward manner that contrasts with the more subtle power plays in later episodes. For example, Frank Underwood's (Kevin Spacey) asides are prominent in the first episode: we interact with him far more than we do in almost any other episode. The character of Frank's wife, Claire (Robin Wright), reacts more strongly to situations than her usual, controlled self in later episodes, such as when she hears that President Walker (Michel Gill) did not nominate Frank for Secretary of State. The pilot, therefore, showcases a kind of richness in the narrative that seeks to distinguish *House of Cards* from the next show. From the pilot, we can

assume the direct address and the on-screen text bubbles (which appear to the side of a character when he/she sends/receives a text) will feature prominently in the series, as will continued power plays by and between Claire and Frank Underwood. Mittell calls this richness the narrative "poetics" of a show. By adopting the term "poetics," Mittell denotes a focus on the ways in which a text creates meaning (Mittell 2015). It forms part of an analysis that is concerned primarily with the question, "How does this text work?" (Mittell 2015). This thesis will adopt an approach that questions the effects of narrative form on the content, exposing the latent meanings underlying the text. Moreover, we shall diverge from Mittell's work in another way: while his aim is to provide a model of formal analysis that is "not divorced from cultural contexts, historical formations and modes of practice," we shall here focus on those impasses of meaning during moments or scenes in which the inherent structures of a text are laid bare by the narrative. In other words, this thesis focuses more on the formal elements composing the text and less on the contexts that produced it in the first place.

ii. *The Operational Aesthetic*

Conventional television programming more often than not privileges content over form. Yet in the past three decades, complex television has promoted a greater attention to the textual machinery over its product. The spectator interacts with a complex narrative in such a way that she uncovers formal tools that already exist in the text. This is what Mittell labels the "operational aesthetic" (Mittell 2006). Here he draws on Neil Harris' case study of the showman P.T. Barnum. Harris, in an attempt to explain the audience's fascination with form, claims, "Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of

intellectual exercise, stimulating even when literal truth could not be determined" (Harris 1981). Harris goes on to say that audiences, marveling at artistic fraud, sought to "discover how deception had been practiced," finding it "even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself" (Harris 1981). It is worth noting here the emphasis on the act of viewing as a distinctly "intellectual exercise," since both Amanda Lotz and Mittell have pointed to complex television as promoting a sense of the spectator having undergone a "cognitive workout" (Mittell 2006). In the act of critical spectatorship of complex television, the viewer briefly suspends her attention to content in order to uncover the intricacies of form. In Harris's account, such is the essence of the operational aesthetic. This concept will serve as the bedrock of discussion as we explore its use and effects in *House of Cards*.

Mittell uses Bordwell's notion of the narrational mode to further understand the conceptual approach guided by the operational aesthetic (Mittell 2015). In his 1985 book, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell models an approach that attempts to account for how viewers engage with texts. For Bordwell, a "narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrative construction and comprehension" (Bordwell 150). Kristin Thompson extends this approach to television by arguing that several shows, such as *Twin Peaks*, constitute a kind of "art television" (Thompson 2003). Thompson suggests that the norms of art cinema have been imported onto the small screen (Thompson 2003). Using the British miniseries *The Singing Detective* (Potter, Dennis, BBC, 1986), Thompson applies Bordwell's narrational mode to demonstrate how television narratives can mimic complex narrational modes (Thompson 2003).

Mittell further explores the notion of the operational aesthetic with reference to Jeffrey Sconce, who recognizes structures that he labels "metareflexive," including "breaking frame" or violating the fourth wall: essentially, acknowledging "the artifice of the overall diegesis"

(Sconce 2004). One such example of the metareflixive narrative (a term he often exchanges for the "conjectural narrative") is the 'live' episode of *ER* (Crichton, Michael, *ER*, NBC, 1994) which is described as "stunt television" in that it refocuses interest on a series via deviation from the series profile (Sconce 2004). The *ER* episode played on the simultaneous advancement of two stories: the representational and the presentational drama, the latter performed to a live audience stripped of the show's cinematic sheen. Sconce cites this example as one that highlights the Brechtian quality of self-reflexivity, engaging the viewer in a contemplation of the inner workings of the narrative. Thus, while Sconce uses the term metareflexive, it shares the idea of self-conscious showmaking with the operational aesthetic. Drawing on Mittell, Harris and Sconce's ideas, we can pinpoint the operational aesthetic as a mode in which the spectator is urged to not only engage in the content of the narrative being presented but also to marvel at and question the craft required to pull off such narrative construction.

We can view the operational aesthetic as nurturing a skill that viewers learn over time through the repeated viewing and dismantling of narratives. As Mittell notes, complex television invites "temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long term viewing and active engagement" (Mittell 2015). He also parallels complex television with other media forms that require a level of cognitive participation on the part of the audience (such as videogames). While the platform of the videogame is markedly different from that of television, the work of Ian Bogost draws a neat parallel between the two forms that utilizes ideas inherent in the operational aesthetic. Like complex television programs, there is a level of competency that is learnt via successive use and interaction with videogames. In his book *Unit Operations*, Bogost underlines this need to gain competency in decoding stories and diegetic worlds in the realm of the game. By calling attention to the complex narrative as an

essentially interactive medium, the operational aesthetic gestures towards this control and mastery over the structure of the narrative. Videogames are predicated upon a viewer's willingness to submit to and control the diegetic storyworld. Bogost notes in particular how the participant not only manipulates the gaming narrative but must intuit the procedural logic behind the game's "structure" to do so, "assembling" the narrative from "textual cues" (Bogost 2006). For example, in *Mr Robot* (Esmail, Sam, USA Network, June 2015), when we watch 'fsociety' implement a successful code to hack into the databases at EvilCorp, we are forced to unravel the events leading up to that moment and anticipate the consequences that will determine the actions of the protagonist Elliot and his team, calling attention to the logic beneath the evolving storyline.

The operational aesthetic as defined here and by Mittell picks up on a text's structure. Explicit in this study, then, is an attention to the operational aesthetic, and therefore narrative structure. Poststructuralism sought to move past the identification of formal patterns that generate meaning in a narrative – the focus of traditional structuralism. The poststructuralism of Derrida incorporates structuralist thought and moves beyond it. To clarify the method of criticism used in this essay, we will explore how deconstruction, and Derrida's notion of logocentrism in particular, invites a mode of analysis that I argue is inherent in the concept of complex television and the operational aesthetic.

iii. *Derrida and Deconstruction*

Since poststructuralism derives from, and is a reaction to, structuralism, a brief overview of the latter can help us to understand the context in which Derrida forms his methodology.

Structuralist theory states that the self-contained text comprises a set of structures responsible for the generation of meaning. In Northrop Frye's work, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), we see a conscious effort to incorporate the scientific method of analysis into a methodological framework applied to literary criticism. He asks the reader in his polemical introduction, "what if criticism is a science as well as an art?" (Frye 1990). Frye pushes for a closed system of analysis - an inward looking method. For anything external to the text to infringe upon a reading would be to derange the mode of isolated interpretation. Eagleton, paraphrasing Frye, notes that the text is an "autonomous verbal structure" in which a set of units forms "a system of verbal relationships" (Eagleton 1996). Here we can take the word "unit" and apply it to television to denote any individual site of production, from an element of mise-en-scene such as a costume to a line or word in the dialogue.

For example, by employing a mix of technical and narrative units in its production, *House of Cards* is often praised for its high cinematic value. David Fincher, directing the first two episodes of the first season, instructed his cinematographer Eigil Bryld to use no zoom, no steadicam and no handheld cameras. Everything about the cinematography, Fincher says, is designed to communicate a sense of power and space (Kreindler 2013). The power stance assumed by the camera coincides with the prolonged power stance upheld by the show's protagonist, Frank Underwood. Further, a unit of meaning can include both the color of Robin Wright's shirt in a single moment, and the total effect of Claire's gradual shift from white to black garb over the course of a single episode (a symbolism that occurs in the first episode of the fourth season). Thus a unit of meaning can come in the form of anything from an epigrammatic utterance ("Generosity is its own form of power") to the angle of the camera as it relates to the light reflecting off Robin Wright's dress.

Eagleton highlights several terms inherent in the structuralist technique: opposition, inversion, parallelism and equivalence (Eagleton 1996). For example, by exposing the opposition and inversions of images of light and dark in *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers, Netflix, 2016), the structuralist might uncover meanings pertaining to the theme of good versus evil underlying the narrative. Importantly, however, these meanings are a product of relationships occurring only within the confines of the text. Where the show was shot, or the stories or memories on which the text is based, are meaningless for the structuralist. As a result, the notions of good and evil are rigid, stable binaries couched in the storyworld. In her search for meaning through allegory the structuralist might move beyond the stable binary of good/evil to parallel the notions of presence/absence as they relate to motifs of, say, light/dark in the show. When the young Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) goes missing, his presence on screen represents a state of stability, while his absence brings with it a shadow of darkness and evil over the town both literally and figuratively: the town mourns Will's absence and further evil unfolds in the form of more disappearances and monsters living in the walls. A step further still and we might invert the binary, showing how the use of dark space, or 'nothingness,' is in fact a manifestation of presence rather than absence, peace rather than conflict. Will Byers' rescue is dampened by the possibility that the portals to the underworld remain open, the underworld potentially representing a space that is now safer or more stable than that of the real world.

This overview of structuralism establishes terms of contrast with our central methodology, poststructuralism. If structuralism placed a strong emphasis on the text as the sacred source of meaning, poststructuralism, without opening the theoretical floodgates to a consideration of contextual information, at least conceded that the meanings generated by inherent oppositions in a text were not as stable as the structuralists argued.

Derrida's seminal work, *Of Grammatology*, provides a good entry point into a discussion of the terms that comprise his conceptual framework for deconstruction. Derrida devotes substantial effort early on to establish the conceptions of language that he sees as problematic. In several sections of the book, most notably in his approach to Rousseau's text ('The Exorbitant. Questions of Method'), Derrida evokes what David Wills and Peter Brunette refer to as the problem surrounding the idea that discourse to a great extent cannot control what it utters: that it is an unstable bed of meanings (Brunette 1989). For Derrida, an awareness of the instability of language is crucial to a successful linguistic analysis, and one that is brought up repeatedly throughout his work. In *Of Grammatology*, we see a clear theoretical pivot away from structuralism and toward a mode of analysis that centers on the nature of language as a system in constant flux.

The notion of control is integral to the project of deconstruction, then, not only because of what Derrida sees as the incapacity for language to dictate precisely what it utters or writes. The issue of control extends to the reader and her inability to manage precisely what is interpreted. A discussion of control alongside the Derridean conception of writing will inform Chapter 1, when we look at the gap in meaning introduced by the speech/writing divide.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida scrutinizes Saussure's contention that nothing in language is meaningful in and of itself, only insofar as it differs from the next unit. Derrida refers often to a "metaphysics of presence:" a system of concepts or "first principles" that presumably bear certain unassailable foundations (e.g. Order, Law, Authority, God) (Derrida 2016). Derrida sought to demonstrate how these principles could be deconstructed in a way that exposes their status as products of a particular system of meaning. For example, the first principles 'Good' and 'Nature' - which throughout history have been taken to be stable, coherent concepts - have

opposites 'Evil' and 'Culture.' Meaning is created both by an object's relational difference from the next and the act of collapsing or 'undoing.'

If the text and its binary oppositions are the only sources of meaning, how does deconstruction break away from structuralism? Derrida sees deconstruction as a typically "anti-structuralist gesture" in that structures, rather than being tested for oppositional tropes, are to be "undone, decomposed, desedimented" (Derrida 1985). Furthermore, in *Letter to a Japanese Friend*, Derrida writes that meaning arises when we "decompose" a term to the point at which it literally "loses its construction" (Derrida 1985). E. D. Hirsch, in his rearticulation of deconstruction, elaborates on an idea Culler addresses in *On Deconstruction* (2007) when he writes, "in the temporal process of thinking about anything, one explanation collapses into its contrary" (Hirsch 1983). Deconstruction, Culler notes in *Structuralism and Since*, focuses on the ways in which texts "implicitly criticize and undermine the philosophies in which they are implicated" (Culler 1979).

For example, in *House of Cards*, Frank and Claire uphold their web of power insofar as they remain a single, cohesive team. As soon as one component of the binary wilts, their web of lies withers too. Frank as the dominant male trope and Claire as the routinely oppressed 'other' are, at certain moments of weakness, "undone" by the narrative, their power overturned, their relentless march to sovereignty halted by a figure like Governor Conway (Joel Kinnaman) who poses a significant threat to both the power and intellect of the protagonists. It is during the moments when Conway, Petrov (Lars Mikkelsen) and Claire - all serious rivals to Frank's power games - confront Frank that the narrative exposes its most sophisticated meanings that usher in a commentary on the unstable nature of power. Such moments are found in the act of writing in the show as well as in Frank's direct address, both of which I will discuss in greater depth in the

chapters that follow. The guiding concept in this thesis is Derrida's logocentrism, which we can now turn to in more detail.

iv. *Logocentrism*

Logocentrism refers to what Derrida views as the special relationship between speech and writing. The concept is founded upon two overarching principles: firstly, that there exists a hierarchy between the notions of speech and writing, and secondly, that this hierarchy places speech as the first principle of language. The tension between speech and writing is itself found in the word logocentrism, comprised of the Greek term *logos*, meaning 'speech' or 'reason.' Logocentrism, then, stipulates that speech, not writing, is the original signifier of language. Part I of *Of Grammatology*, entitled 'Writing Before the Letter,' explores the West's historical approach to the act of writing and how a hierarchy came to be formed that placed speech at the helm of language (Derrida 2016). Derrida's exercise of "grammatology" - the study or science of writing - is therefore devoted to liberating our ideas of writing from the subordination of speech.

In Part 1 of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida begins with the contention that writing must come to dominate all critical analysis. He notes that writing has been demoted in the logocentric hierarchy due to its double separation from thought, or ideas, which historically have been expressed verbally. Writing is therefore representative of the spoken word, which is itself a derivative of thought. The project of his book, *Of Grammatology*, is partly to assess the validity of this hierarchy and show that writing is, at the very least, representative of ideas to the same degree as that of speech. By reconceptualizing the written word as a high art that is not derivative

of speech but directly representative of thought, Derrida seeks to rebalance the logocentric divide.

We can turn briefly to an articulation of logocentrism in another of Derrida's works, *The Post Card*, and specifically the first section entitled 'Envois.' Here Derrida outlines a mode of deconstruction via a series of postcards between Derrida and his friend Jonathan Culler that underscore the multifaceted nature of his project. The deconstruction, for example, of the signature as a token of death, or the self-conscious repetition of certain words to assess their necessity, amount to a commentary on the nature of applying theory to texts in general (Derrida 1987). Speech (or *logos*) in the postcards is purposefully destabilized by Derrida in order to account for their plurality of meaning. By providing a commentary on the nature of linguistic analysis and our ability to extract thought from both speech and writing equally, *The Post Card* is an example of logocentric criticism and the way deconstruction can question the act of theoretical application itself.

We might compare this opening section of *The Post Card* with 'Outward, Prefacing' in *Dissemination*, in which Derrida writes further of the principality of *logos*: "the truth that speaks and that hears itself speak, the locus of archetypes" (Derrida 2004). The sense of intimacy and immediacy inherent in the concept of speech will be particularly important to our discussion of the direct address in Chapter 2, where I discuss the convergence of speech with writing as they are represented in *House of Cards*. For the purposes of this introduction, we can use Derrida's discussion in both *Of Grammatology* and *The Post Card* to frame the term logocentrism as it is used in this thesis.

v. *Television and Deconstruction*

How can deconstructivist concepts like logocentrism be used to interpret complex narrative television? There have been several recent studies, including post-feminist readings of *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, Vince, AMC, 2008-13) and psychoanalytic readings of *Mr Robot*, that incorporate, with varying success, deconstructivist techniques. One example of scholarship that effectively utilizes Derrida's ideas to unearth an insightful reading of a television series is Bjering and Holm's article 'The Dora Lange Archive: Derrida Watches *True Detective*.'

Bjering and Holm's article centers on the notion of archival evidence in *True Detective* (Pizzolatto, Nic, HBO, 2014) which, the authors point out, is a show that begins not with a problematic case surrounding a murder but the question of "how to archive the facts" of a murder that has already been solved (Holm 2016). Indeed this statement could quite plausibly serve as a synopsis for the entire first season, in which the plot moves at an almost painfully slow pace yet which provides just enough forward momentum to keep the viewer yearning for one more clue. Warren Buckland's notion of a teleological structure that points toward closure of some sort is somewhat muddled in *True Detective,* given that the Dora Lange archive was lost in a hurricane.

Bjering and Holm thus proceed to deconstruct the idea of the archive as it pertains to Derrida's philosophy. For Derrida, an archive embodied what he called the "social memory" of a community. Drawing on multiple schools of thought arising out of poststructuralist theory, Bjering and Holm argue that the archive is "thus that which has no beginning and that which has no rule" - referring to the slow, open-ended nature of the case and the meandering quality of the narrative in *True Detective*. The authors supply examples of the ways in which *True Detective*'s narrative serves as a meditation on the nature of the archive, questioning the reality in which archiving takes place, such as the symbolic contrast between the old and the new archiving

apparati visible during Cohle and Hart's interviews in the present tense of the show (70s typewriters, modern video cameras).

The authors deconstruct the archive by examining the ambiguities and double meanings inherent in its concept as a play on the Greek word 'arché' (ἀρχή), which means both beginning and rule. The structural forces at play in the act of archiving are shattered by the natural forces of a hurricane, dismantling the "axiomatic assurances, norms, and rules" that the detectives depend on to solve the case. Episode One of the first season introduces the idea that the archive itself is a problem that needs investigating. This problem is displayed early on by the two detectives' approach to archiving evidence. Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) sketches his evidence in a large notepad (which he carries around with him, leading his colleagues to call him 'The Taxman'), while Hart (Woody Harrelson) takes photos. On top of the archival problems posed by the narrative is the question of narrative reliability, given Cohle's regular hallucinations and visions. Employing Derrida's notion of the archive, Bjering and Holm demonstrate with lucid detail and strong analogy the perils of yearning for a "tranquil landscape of all historical knowledge," or, the perfect archive (Holm 2016). I will be giving a similar treatment to the concept of logocentrism in *House of Cards*.

The process of ascertaining tropes and thematic structures, such as that of the archive, forces us to look at the text as a construct. To go beyond merely identifying the ways in which components of a structure produce meaning, poststructuralism extracts and undoes moments in a text that belie instability in the narrative. The project of poststructuralism as it applies to a television series therefore taps into a crucial component of narrative complexity: the operational aesthetic. For the operational aesthetic is at work when the text reveals itself as a mechanical, artificial construct. If the poststructuralist project is to be successful in the televisual medium, we must not

only locate the various tropes that contribute to a show's meaning - in this case, the relationship between speech and writing - but also expose the narrative as embodying fragments, impasses of meaning and opposing structures undone by such relationships that speak to the unstable "plurality of meanings" so crucial to Derrida's work.

CHAPTER ONE

Micro: Logocentrism and the Letter

"From Plato and Aristotle on, scriptural images have regularly been used to illustrate the relationship between reason and experience, perception and memory. But a certain confidence has never stopped taking its assurance from the meaning of the well-known and familiar term: writing."

- Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978, page 199

i. *Overview*

House of Cards focuses on a Democrat from South Carolina, Frank Underwood, and his ascent to the White House. We join the story when Frank is Chief Whip who, having been passed over for the position of Secretary of State, begins to formulate a ruthless plan to install himself and his wife, Claire, into the highest office in the country. It is clear from the outset that Frank and Claire's preoccupation with the seat of the Presidency is aimed less at its prestige and more at its embodiment of executive power. After the first two seasons, which see the power couple battling

and obliterating multiple obstacles along their path, Frank eventually becomes President. Numerous murders (of, for example, Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) and Peter Russo (Corey Stoll)), blackmail schemes (including, for example, Secretary of State Catherine Durant (Jayne Atkinson)), threats (against businessman Raymond Tusk (Gerald McRaney)), Chief Whip Jackie Sharp (Molly Parker)), and more help them along the way. After Frank succeeds the sitting President Garrett Walker at the end of the second season, his machinations catch up with him, and much of the third season follows Frank through negotiations of unforeseen power plays that reveal the Presidency to be a fragile seat of authority. As well as showcasing the various struggles that come with being a President - and an unelected one in particular - the third and fourth seasons place an emphasis on power struggles between couples (for example, Remy (Mahershala Ali) and Jackie, and Frank and Claire) in a way that highlights their repercussions for the fabric of political power. The show itself thus forms a meditation on the dynamics of multiple forms of power, such as that between husband and wife, and master and servant (for example, Frank and Russo, or Frank and his security detail Edward Meechum (Nathan Darrow)). While the creators of *House of Cards* offer various articulations of its central ideas, the three themes that arise out of the relationships among various characters are those of power, obviously, but also ruthless pragmatism and manipulation.

As Michael Dobbs, the author of the book on which *House of Cards* is based, has said in an interview about the show, “the great thing about politics is that you have an arena with all emotions: ambition, high principle, deep dark despair, skullduggery of the first order” (Dobbs 2014). In *House of Cards* we see the various tropes associated with these themes - order, stability, chaos, power plays - but these are also powerfully exhibited in the recurring chasm between speech and writing. In the following chapters we shall undertake a deconstruction of

this logocentric relationship by focusing on two moments in particular. I will show throughout this thesis that the narrative utilizes several features of complex television that speak to a Derridean form of logocentrism.

ii. *Deconstructing* House of Cards

Deconstruction, as Peter Brunette has said, can help us understand "how authority and power constitute themselves through logocentric, oppositional hierarchies" (Brunette 1987). For Derrida, power, speech and writing are inextricably bound, as he explains through the concept of logocentrism: the idea that speech, not writing, is the first principle of language, and should thus be valorized over writing. Speech engenders an interpersonal immediacy that cannot be captured by writing, enshrined in what Derrida calls speech's capacity for "auto-affection" (Derrida 2016). Derrida uses the word "grammatology" (meaning the science of writing) as a point of departure in an attempt to liberate writing from its subordination to speech (Derrida 2006), a move that I discuss in more detail below. The act of writing in *House of Cards* embodies moments in which the narrative turns in on itself, exhibiting what Sconce calls the 'metareflexive,' not only drawing attention to the narrative as a construct but gesturing to the viewer to recognize its inner workings. There are several points in the show in which the act of writing upsets the balance of power and exposes logocentric techniques working beneath the text. Here we shall focus on two such moments: first, in episode thirteen of the second season, when Frank writes a letter to President Walker; and second, when Claire writes a message to Frank in the fourth episode of the fourth season. As well as being two seasons apart, these two moments contrast starkly in their tone and execution, and yet gesture towards a mode of

logocentrism that I argue rebalances the scales to place writing on par with speech. While discussing these two instances of writing, we shall engage in a deconstructive reading of the two sequences as they relate to, and problematize, Derridean logocentrism in which the boundaries between speech and writing are collapsed.

Generally, the theme of writing in *House of Cards* is somewhat troubled. There are multiple moments in the show that gesture to writing as a symbol of power, yet these moments are often overshadowed by the larger narratives in which the act of writing plays only a minor part. Consider, for example, the letter Frank writes to the family of a dead soldier. In the ninth episode of the third season, an American soldier is killed in a mission to gain information about the Jordan Valley fiasco when the situation gets "compromised." Covering his bases, Frank writes to the parents of the deceased to tell them their son was killed in a "training exercise." In this instance writing a letter serves to highlight not only a formality but also Frank's ruthless dishonesty when it comes to covering up a mistake that would set him back politically. A more subtle yet recurrent example of writing in the show is embodied in the writer Tom Yates (Paul Sparks), who in the fourth season plays a pivotal role in the relationship between Frank and Claire. When Claire is at her most vulnerable, whether giving blood or at her dying mother's side, Tom provides solace when she needs it most. But Tom is not employed to save the Underwood marriage, despite that turning out to be his primary function in the fourth season. Instead, when Tom is first introduced in the seventh episode of the third season, he is asked by Frank to write a novel about Frank's pet project, the America Works program. Tom, however, begins writing a story about Frank and Claire's personal life, and when he hands them both a draft of the first chapter they are put off less by his prying into their personal history and more by the truth of the writing. That it is the writer who ends up repairing the cracks in the Underwood's

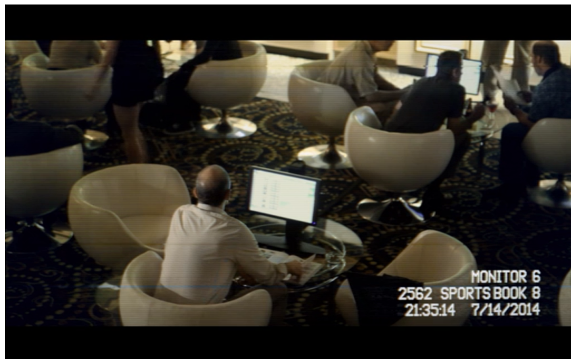
complex marriage is a telling example of the presence of writing as a form of power in the narrative. (Is there significance in the fact that Tom's book about the Underwoods never gets published? Or that Tom, employed as a writer, becomes instead the couple's speechwriter?).

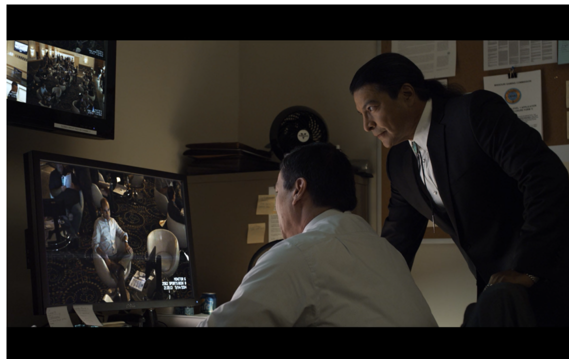
Each of the aforementioned instances of writing raise questions relating to the Derridean distinction between speech and writing. To what extent is speech valorized over writing in the show? Does speech take on the quality of enshrined "auto-affection" that Derrida suggests? And in a complex narrative that employs the act of both speech and writing to leverage power in some way, what does a deconstruction of these terms reveal? Our two specific examples provide an answer.

iii. *Frank's Letter to President Walker*

The Jordan Valley incident brings out the Underwood typewriter for the second time. The first time we see the typewriter is when Frank writes to President Walker at the end of the second season. Frank, in a rare moment of (perceived) uncertainty, looks at us to say that he has managed to "isolate the President from everyone, including myself." Having gone one step too far in ostracizing the President from his entire cabinet, Frank strives to make amends. The tension between President and Vice-President extends back several episodes when Frank goes behind the President's back and gets involved in a money laundering scheme, reaching its height in the season finale. Doug's (Michael Kelly) travel records match up to a sighting in which he is linked to a casino owner, Daniel Lanigan (Gil Birmingham), at the heart of the laundering scheme (Figures 1 and 2). This links the President's cabinet to the corruption, but for the President to avoid charges it must be proven to the House Judiciary Committee that he was

unaware of the scheme. Frank's plot to take down Walker by orchestrating events (such as Doug's meeting) that lead to his impeachment becomes apparent to Walker himself. The situation reaches a climax when Walker says to Frank, in the penultimate episode of the second season, "From this moment forward, I don't want to hear your voice. I don't want to see your face. And if I do, I will put you on your goddamn back." For the first time we see the President lose his temper and threaten in the most Underwood of ways - an example of several we shall see in which the rhetoric of Frank's malign ruthlessness infects other characters in the show.





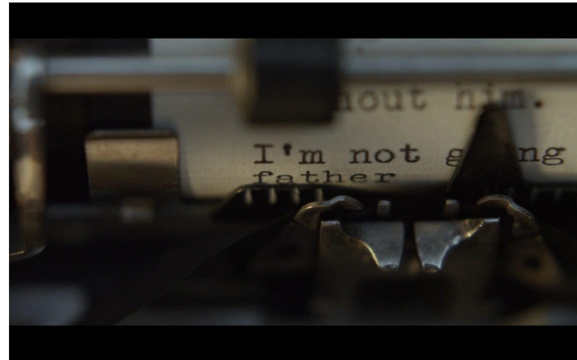
Figures 1 & 2. *Footage of Doug at a casino helps to implicate President Walker in a money laundering scheme.*

Claire, equally as ruthless yet arguably more controlled than Frank in situations in which their power is jeopardized, demands that Frank make amends with Walker. If President Walker and Raymond Tusk are both against Frank, the Underwoods have no cover and are potentially left implicated in the impeachment fiasco, putting Frank on his back. Thus, heeding to Claire's advice to "seduce him," Frank resolves to write a letter to the President.

The fact that Frank decides to write a letter is itself worthy of note. Of course, this is the only way to reach President Walker because he has exiled himself to Camp David and doesn't want to see Frank again. Still, elsewhere in the show we see situations of high tension diffused by appeal

to persuasion and rhetoric via speech, for example when Frank convinces Secretary of State Catherine Durant to work with Frank when she threatens to side with Walker. In keeping with the contemporary disregard for all things slow such as letter writing and, increasingly, email when it comes to communication, the use of letter writing in the show is used as a special means of persuasion surrounding issues that demand careful attention such as death, trust, or divorce. Whereas in the UK version of *House of Cards* (released in 1990) letter writing seemed the default mode of communication for political and personal matters, the act of writing in the US version is prized as a unique, expressive, and highly personal mode. Showrunner Beau Willimon uses writing in a way that taps into its contemporary cultural signification as an authentic, unique and personal medium, in contrast to the ephemeral new media in the show such as the 21st century bitesize journalism of Slugline, 'trending topics' like the intimate photo of Claire

sleeping, or the broadcasting of ICO's militant terrorism. The typewriter thus becomes a symbol of authenticity in the face of new, fast digital media (figures 3-6). The prized slowness of letter writing, it can be said, is therefore in keeping with the understanding of writing held by the largely millennial audience Netflix is targeting.



Figures 3-6. *Frank's letter scene is populated by a diversity of shots to offset the traditional slowness of letter writing.*

The content of the letter is striking from both a narrative and character standpoint. Frank performs a risky bluff, including with the letter a signed confession to having committed all of the crimes Walker is accused of, which would acquit Walker of any wrongdoing. "I said I would take the fall for you, and now I give you the means to make that happen," Frank writes. In the main body of the letter, Frank assumes a deeply personal tone, which is prefaced by the use of

the typewriter given to him by his father before he left for college, and one that bears his family's name. While Frank writes, his voiceover - in a grave, sincere tone - guides his typing hands. The immediate dissonance we experience as viewers is that between Frank's surprising honesty in the letter and the knowledge that he is simultaneously searching for a way to win over Walker's trust. Frank writes: "You said I wanted to diminish you. The truth is I don't. You said I wanted to challenge you in 2016. The truth is I don't. You said I wanted the presidency for myself. The truth is... I do."

How do we reconcile this truthful tone with his twisted motives? Frank confesses to wanting the Presidency to himself. His powers of persuasion in this instance lie not in his manipulation of logic but in the superior nobility of his motives to "fight, for you and alongside you" as opposed to his admitted personal ambition to be President. Instead of arguing his case by brute rhetorical persuasion, Frank lays on the table what appears to Walker to be his true motives. The appeals to Walker's emotional side ("Your loyal friend, still in my heart, if not in yours…") prompt the President to question his decision to exile Frank. When Walker receives the letter, he calls Frank, who admits to having lied in his journey to the Vice-Presidency, but says that it was a necessary part of the image he must perpetuate to survive in the political arena. Frank agrees to try to whip up the requisite votes to avoid Walker's impeachment. At this point we know that the letter has provided Frank with at least some cover, given Walker's willingness to interact and cooperate with Frank. Yet we know that Frank has made the same promise to whip up votes to Jackie. Walker's willingness to forgive Frank is questionable here, since as recently as the previous episode he was accusing Frank of betraying him ("I will put you on your goddamn back"). Nonetheless, Claire's insistence that Frank "seduce him" by giving him "your heart" and

jeopardizing their own position by admitting to a money laundering scheme will yield a positive outcome for the Underwoods.

This sequence, taken in its entirety, exhibits a notable dynamism. Frank's letter to Walker interweaves a diversity of shot angles, utilizes multiple dramatic pauses ("...I do"), shows Frank variously glancing at the camera or facing it to speak to us. The timing of the direct addresses is also carefully considered: the story from his childhood is delivered to the camera as Frank leans on the desk, typewriter offscreen, looking up at us, which has the effect of lending this segment of the letter an air of sincerity (figure 7). The slowness of letter writing that could easily be dull is here extinguished by a combination of effects that contribute to making the act of writing dynamic, perhaps even thrilling, while simultaneously gesturing to the show's own dependence on writing for its success to persuade and manipulate - the operational aesthetic once again at work in the narrative.

Figure 7. *The sequence breaks away from the typewriter while Frank tells us a story from his childhood*.

Each of these moves - the confession, the appeal to emotion, the gesture towards authenticity in both the language and the technical apparatus used to create the letter - exist for the most part on the surface of the drama. Within the conflict of speech and writing in this sequence lie fragments, so-called impasses of meaning and pressure points that problematize the generation of meaning in the narrative. In *House of Cards*, these impasses of meaning are illuminated by the relationship between speech and writing as articulated by Derrida.

iv. *Logocentrism and the Letter*

We can briefly contextualize Derrida's logocentrism, before applying it in more detail to a deeper discussion of *House of Cards*. As I have noted, Derrida seeks to dismantle the hierarchical logocentric relationship between speech and writing. Speech has historically been given priority over writing in its so-called living essence or "auto-affection" as an act in which I can literally "hear myself" (Derrida 2016). The term 'writing', for Derrida, describes "not only a physical gesture" but the "totality of what makes it possible" as a mode of communication (Derrida 2016). In other words, a mode of writing which showcases the conflict between what is intended to be conveyed and what is actually conveyed, which Derrida views as having distinguished writing historically from speech (Derrida 2016).

We see precisely this tension - between the true meaning and the meaning conveyed - at play in Frank's letter to President Walker. By admitting to Walker that Frank would like the Presidency to himself, the value of confession is interpreted as authenticity, and the supposed transparency of Frank's motives is boosted by a series of gestures - the typewriter, the sign-off - that hark toward the sentimental. Frank's willingness to divulge ("I want to tell you something I have never told anyone") represents to Walker a trust that Frank wants reciprocated from the President. For Derrida, this gap between the intended meaning and the true meaning is the essence of writing. The interpretive gap thus plays on two forms of irony. Frank states one thing - conciliation and partnership - but means its opposite - disgrace and usurpation. The language of the letter, taken in its totality, is thus ironic. But the sequence also draws attention to the dramatic irony constructed by the narrative via the use of direct address, with Frank feeding us knowledge of events before they play out (for example, during Frank's persuasion of Donald Blythe (Reed Birney) to work on the controversial education bill in the second episode of the first season). The dramatic irony rests in the viewer's knowledge of Frank's true intentions: to falsely instill in

Walker a sense of trust and kinship. The gap between intended and true meaning is therefore constitutive of an ironic gesture inherent in writing. While Derrida offers little on the subject of irony in *Of Grammatology*, crucial to the act of writing is its constant deferral of meaning that utilizes the gap in meaning. Like irony and the exploitation of double meaning, writing for Derrida undertakes a "violation of order" by harnessing the interpretive gap - a device central to the poststructuralist project (Culler 2007).

There are at least two key communicative platforms at play in the letter sequence in *House of Cards* that play on the relationship between writing and speech: the content of the letter and the physical act of writing it. The content purposefully troubles interpretation both from the audience and Walker. At this point the audience is aware of Frank's intention to have Walker impeached, yet with the cards stacked heavily against him we can nevertheless entertain the possibility that Frank is being truthful with Walker, just in case Walker is acquitted and then remaining Vice-President becomes the better of two options for Frank. In one respect Frank is very honest with him, whatever his intentions: Walker *is* a just man (and thus all the more likely to be destroyed by the Underwoods), and Frank doesn't necessarily wish to challenge the power of the Presidency so much as this President himself. Frank targets the human weakness in Walker (for forgiveness), just as he does with Zoe (for information), Meechum (for loyalty) and Claire (for greater power), by exploiting their own desires to get what he wants.

The sequence in *House of Cards* also draws attention to the physical act of letter-writing. We have already seen how the typewriter represents a symbol of authenticity, in contrast to, for example, a typed email. The authenticity associated with age lends the letter a kind of power in itself. An email might have conflicted with the sincerity of the message, deflating the act of a certain legitimacy or weight. The letter becomes a symbol of trust and rare vulnerability on the

part of Frank. The fact that Frank divulges a piece of his past - his troubled relationship to his father, the significance of the typewriter ("I've only written one other letter with these keys. It did not fail me then. I hope it will not fail me now") - lends weight to the idea that Frank is willing to dig into his own sense of trust to convey earnestness. For although the letter is mostly untruthful, it contains powerful notes of sincerity by recalling a painful childhood memory, thus heeding to Claire's request to "give him your heart." In this regard, the letter's power lies as much in its language as in what it symbolizes.

Language and symbolism in the letter are tightly bound, too. For we encounter consistent motifs or images that play beneath the explicit language. One is the letter's marital undertones. The repetition, for example, of "I don't," before the lingering pause and the words to the camera: "I do." This, too, is the first instance in which we are given the overt sense that Frank is seducing us as much as he is Walker. Frank dreams of the "oath" to take the highest office in the land, the need to "sacrifice" oneself for something greater. This choice of words, and the signoff, "still in my heart, if not in yours," all play into a language of matrimony. The language of the letter thus gestures to its status as a symbol of unity and trust in a similar way to that of marriage. The letter as symbol ushers in the question of its function. Frank's motives are clear here: pave the way for an exit strategy that ideally does the least to mitigate his and Claire's position of power by diminishing Tusk's relationship with the President to create an opportunity to replace Walker when Tusk confesses that Walker knew about the money laundering scheme, as Tusk eventually does.

In this sense we can see the letter as an instance of what Mittell calls the "narrative special effect," a moment in which the narrative takes "unforeseen sharp twists that cause the entire scenario to reboot" (Mittell 2006). One particularly powerful example of the narrative special

effect in *House of Cards* occurs in episode four of the fourth season in which, among a series of threats that could prove fatal to the Underwood marriage and by turn their political careers, Frank is shot by Lucas Goodwin at a rally. This event, aside from showcasing a prime dramatic denouement in the plot, resets several wayward, complex narrative threads. Indeed, the side stories just prior to this point become so intertwined that the first half of this episode sees many characters confused about what they are talking about. Doug misunderstands Frank's suggestion to "catch [Claire] before it's too late" - taking "her" to mean Leann (Neve Campbell) (Claire's campaign director) before she gets on the plane; Frank confuses Leann's reference to certain "conditions" attached to Claire's letter as his when in fact they are Claire's; and Seth slips by almost leaking sensitive information to an aide to Heather Dunbar (Frank's Democratic re-election opponent) (figure 8). The characters' uncertainty reflects the fact that various narrative strands (Claire's situation, the Russian question, Lucas's whereabouts, Zoe and Congressman Russo's deaths) pile up, threatening to obscure the central storyline in the show. The text draws attention to itself by layering in our own potential confusion with the characters', consequently "pushing the narrative to the forefront" in an effective use of the operational aesthetic.

Figure 8. *Visible puzzlement on the part of multiple characters as the narrative strands become entangled.*

The narrative "reboot" of Frank's shooting - a prime example of Mittell's definition of a complex narrative - is also found in Frank's letter. The letter forms a narrative special effect in that it is highlighted as a surprising tool to leverage Frank's desire to obtain the presidency, which ultimately serves to change Walker's mind about Tusk from favor to disfavor, and about Frank from disfavor to favor. The letter, having placed Frank within the trust of the President, then allows Jackie to do her work to whip up enough votes for impeachment to take down Walker and give Frank a clear path to the Oval Office. Before he writes it, when it seems as though the Underwoods are completely isolated, we wonder how Frank will rearrange the cards in their favor. How will the narrative resolve itself? The letter thus serves as a device that ultimately realigns multiple disparate narrative strands, a technique common to complex television that utilizes the operational aesthetic.

The self-referential nature of a visual text is for Mittell a hallmark of modern complex television. In *Complex TV*, Mittell discusses the concept of "discourse time," which is the "temporal framework involved in telling and receiving the story" (Mittell 2015). The temporal framing used during Frank's letter sequence speaks to the immediacy of speech as contrasted with the slower pace of writing. As we have seen, Derrida's explication of the historical role of speech and writing touches on this so-called imminence to the act of speech as an unadulterated conduit of meaning, as "pure auto-affection" (Derrida 2016). During the letter sequence, for example, the action repeatedly cuts between various temporal frames that seem to extinguish a sense of continuous time. We see images of Meechum delivering the letter to Walker at Camp David, before cutting back to Frank typing the letter. So-called story time (linear, chronological time) is rearranged: is the narrative with Walker or Frank here? Frank's spoken voiceover suggests a contiguity of speech and writing: he speaks to us as he writes. The cut to Walker

reading the letter alters the contiguity, as well as the chronology via a flash forward, hindering the temporal frames (figure 9). Writing, bound as it is in this sequence to speech through the use of voiceover, is relayed to us during multiple temporal settings. The scene is shot in a way that suggests Frank is speaking to both us and Walker at the same time. The written word becomes immediate and concurrent with the spoken word. Temporal framing in this scene thus reveals a collapsing of the distinction between speech and writing as occupying two contrasting modes of communication which traditionally saw speech as immediate, and writing as distant, or derivative of speech.

Figure 9. *A continual shift in temporal frames between Frank typing and Walker reading.*

We see in this sequence, then, an instance in which the notions of speech and writing as articulated by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* coalesce. The *phoné*, or voice, comes in the form of an audio representation of the letter through the voiceover. Frank is writing the words, but

speaking them to us, dictating his motives in a mock direct address. 'Mock direct,' because the defining factor in Frank's addresses to the camera is their privacy, their gesture to secrecy. It can be argued that situated among the characters' power plays and sly machinations, the direct address is the outstanding mark of authenticity in the narrative: a brief reprieve from the performance of dishonesty and duplicity, and thus a site of knowledge that is comparatively stable. But in Frank's letter sequence we have a third component, Walker, who directly affects the speech (and therefore the writing) as a figure on whose actions Frank depends for his ascension. In this respect as well, the sequence extinguishes the boundary between speech and writing: we appear to follow Frank's conscious thought-process as he types, yet revealed in his words are the subtle machinations and power plays that he uses in his everyday speech. The voiceover does much to trouble an understanding of where the real voice is coming from in this sequence. By drawing the narrative in the present and the immediate future, through the mind of Frank and his machinations, but also through the words of the writers of the show, we see the emergence of the operational aesthetic.

The letter plays upon a dimension of deconstruction that dissects fragments of a text to reveal what Barbara Johnson calls their "undecidability," the impossibility of closure or singular meaning (Johnson 2005). It is difficult not to entertain the thought that if the President had read Frank's words after impeachment the meaning of the letter for him would have altered significantly. Inserting himself into the "highest office of our land," Frank's motives might have been seen to be dishonest and thus Walker would have reason to publish the confessions. Frank's power and success in his maneuver to become president is, as we have seen, contingent upon events going his way (enough votes for impeachment, Tusk's cooperation, etc), which touches on the idea that Frank, while master of his rhetoric, cannot control the whims of the future. In

this regard Frank's power is exposed as essentially unstable, arbitrarily contingent upon both a certain set of circumstances working in Frank's favor and the desired reception of Frank's words by Walker. The moment at which Frank writes to President Walker is an instance of what Derrida and Johnson call a "point of undecidability" where we see the text's interwoven "codes" working to produce a set of meanings (Derrida 2009).

The letter sequence highlights a side to Frank that is pervasive yet rarely acknowledged in the narrative: that Frank rarely 'knows' that his plans will work, and is subject to the whims of fate just as much as any other character on the show. Therefore another way in which the boundary between speech and writing is collapsed in this sequence is that the letter is both written and spoken in a way that reinforces the sense that Frank is not master of his fate, must adhere to the possibility that his words are subject to a meaning that is transparent or, in Derrida's words, is never "present," and is therefore subject to an infinitude of unforeseen future circumstances over which Frank has no control (Derrida 2016). This is true especially at the moment of writing, as stated above. It is worth noting, however, that on the other hand the result of the letter and the end of the episode, in which we see Tusk diminished and Frank subsequently sworn in while negotiating a deal with the Chinese, demonstrates his mastery of psychological manipulation and political scheming to gain power.

One crucial difference, however, is that while Frank is susceptible to changing circumstances, a powerful aspect of his character is his ability to adapt. The letter performs two moves which, Derrida would argue, classify it as harboring instability in its meaning: first, via an appeal to Frank's ambitions ("What politician hasn't dreamed of what it would be like to take oath of the highest office of our land?"), it takes hold of the idea inherent in writing to concretize or make

real through “ideographic inscription” the intentions of a subjective mind; secondly, it exposes the flaws in this thinking by being subject to what Derrida calls “the power of *differance*,” a plurality of “infinite meaning” caused by the inevitability of fluctuating circumstances (Derrida 2016). The letter therefore not only troubles the traditional boundary of speech and writing as Derrida describes in the second chapter in *Of Grammatology*, but serves to further underscore the volatility of writing as an “archiving structure” (a “structure of archivization;” in French, “une structure d’archivation”) (Bjering Holm 2016).

This sequence highlights a trait unique to the character of Frank Underwood and an important tenet of Chapter 2: that any communication between Frank and another character is necessarily always a three-way communication. For Frank’s power plays to be effective he must have an audience, and from the first minute we meet him he establishes a relationship with us by looking at the camera. Utilizing the voiceover and the direct address at multiple moments in the letter sequence, Willimon exploits a sense of intimacy in which we are made to feel Frank is talking to us as much as he is talking to Walker (due not least to the differing messages both audiences (Walker and ourselves) are supposed to be hearing). The words are delivered to us first and foremost as a showcase of his power. A deeper discussion of the role of the direct address and its application to Derridean logocentrism will be extended in Chapter 2. For the purposes of the present chapter, we can see this shift between Frank talking to us and the concurrent images of Walker reading the letter as iterations of the “authority and power” of Frank to dictate the temporal boundaries of the narrative.

v. *Claire’s Letter to Frank*

As a letter between two very logically motivated politicians, Frank's correspondence is unique in its emotional appeal. The weight of sentimental statements in the letter, such as "We all must make sacrifices to achieve our dreams," could, as we noted, be found in a letter between husband and wife. And yet the letter that Claire sends to Frank, wife to husband, in the fourth episode of the fourth season is conspicuous by its lack of emotion. At this stage in the show's narrative, in which we've seen both characters threaten one another repeatedly, any psychologist providing counselling for their marriage until this point would have diagnosed them with proximal abandonment, or the relational state of physical presence but emotional absence. Now, however, Frank is on the election trail, trying to win the Democratic primary, while Claire, refusing to stand by Frank's side for once (due to what she sees as Frank's repeated disregard of her own ambitions for potential office), is spending time in her quiet hometown in Texas with her dying mother. At this point Frank has made the mistake of isolating himself from his wife while ruthlessly using her to win electoral support for himself. Claire then writes a letter to Frank in which she threatens to divorce him, giving it to Leann, her campaign manager, to deliver in person in the White House (figure 10). Claire's motives in writing the letter, however, are more intricate than merely to separate herself from Frank. Like Frank's faith in his ability to predict Walker's decision not to use the attached confession to avoid impeachment, Claire believes the letter, including her threat to announce her divorce intentions on Super Tuesday, will encourage Frank to cooperate with her decision to run against him for the White House. Unlike Frank's letter to Walker, this sequence is short, and written in a noticeably nonchalant manner (on the back of a scrap piece of paper) for the weight of its narrative significance. For a letter that jeopardizes the unity of the central protagonists - and by turn the basis of the entire narrative of *House of Cards* - the letter is given surprisingly little attention in the overall fabric of the

episode. For this short scene is preceded by Frank and Meechum engaging in bored, flirtatious behavior by drawing on a wall of the White House. The gravity of the situation is thus not justified by the events displayed to us.

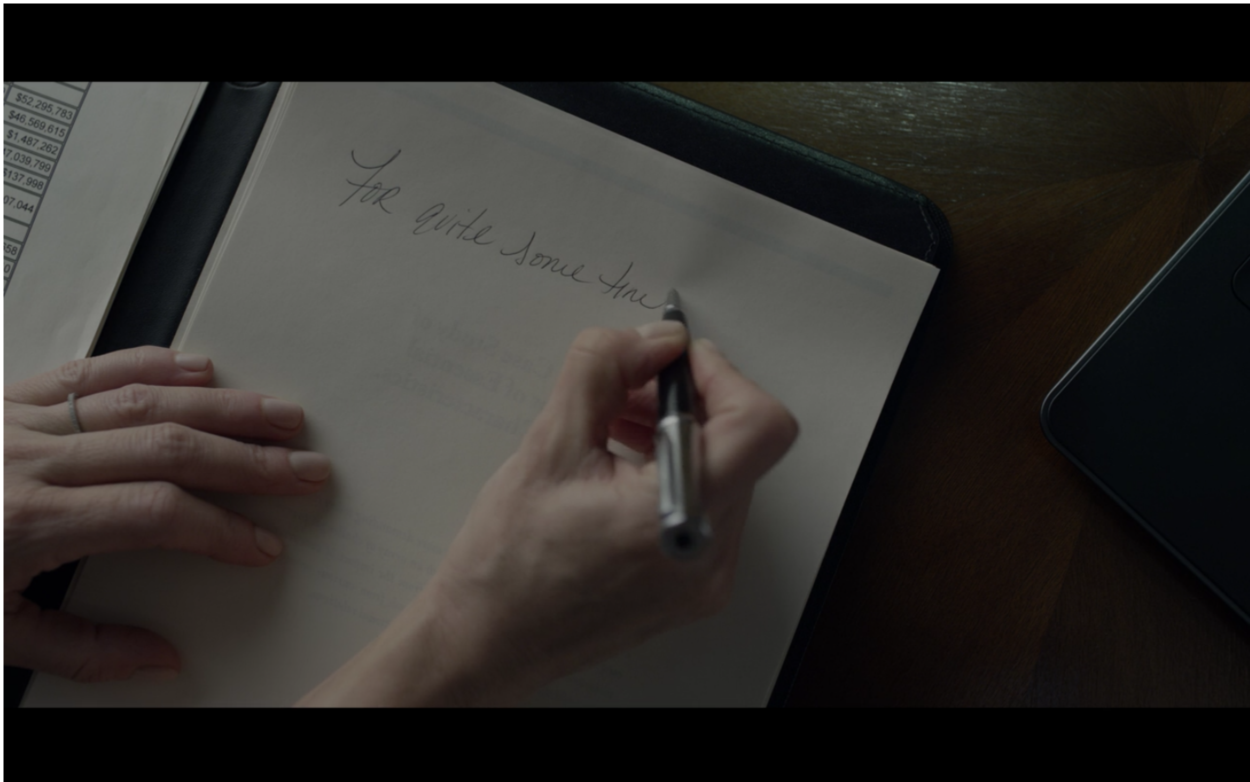


Figure 10. *All we see of Claire's writing process, a quick note on scrap paper with calamitous implications.*

We can consider the letter's status as a symbol, as we did with Frank's letter to Walker. The symbolism in *House of Cards* oscillates between subtlety and overstatement. The battle imagery in season two and three, for example, is overtly displayed by Frank's hobby of coloring soldier figurines. Here Claire's letter sequence is interrupted by her mother, Elizabeth (Ellen Burstyn), killing a lizard. "Watch your step," Elizabeth says, "There's blood on the floor." This minor interruption alludes to the possibility that Claire's letter might be the fatal blow to Frank's

power. Yet, in a highly unanticipated plot twist, another example of a narrative special effect, fate beats Claire to it, for Frank is soon after shot by Lucas Goodwin, the formerly-imprisoned lover of Zoe who has been tracking Frank's bloody trail since Zoe 'fell' onto the Metro tracks in season two.

Before the assassination attempt, however, the letter from Claire to Frank amounts to a key impasse of meaning in the plot that shifts the set of meanings that underlie the narrative in this sequence. Given the gravity of the letter's message, it is the language that is most striking. The letter plays on the distinction between speech and writing that Derrida expounds in *Of Grammatology*, for the language adheres to that of a public speech. As we saw, Derrida's aim is to collapse this distinction, and Claire's letter, while brief, does much to underscore the flaws inherent in prizing the act of speech over writing by essentially binding the two. Jessica Goldstein, writing in *Vulture*, has pointed out that Claire's language adheres to a form of rhetoric "that Claire would tell the public" (Goldstein 2016). Giving the letter to Leann to deliver to Frank, Goldstein notes, is not only "a very Underwood-style" of declaration, harnessing one's power to convince others to do the work for them (for example, Frank persuading Jackie to whip up votes for Walker's impeachment in the final episode of the second season) but, a gesture that tells Frank that Claire is functional, even powerful in certain ways, without him. In fact, however, the assassination attempt makes it clear that Claire's aspirations and power depend entirely on Frank. Frank is the only influential politician who might conceivably support her political ambitions, which are tied to Frank's health; she cannot realize them unless Frank survives the shooting. By bypassing the formalities associated with a message of this magnitude and instead writing a declarative statement to the world, Claire destroys whatever intimacy remains between them.

What sparks this seemingly impulsive move? Everything about Claire's body language in this short scene suggests she is at peace with herself. She leans against the doorframe, musing to Leann about her father's words to her the day before she married Frank: "You have one life Claire. Are you sure this is the man you want to spend it with?" Claire's response is telling: "I didn't want to live my life full of doubt. Well, I think Francis wants me to doubt myself." At this point Claire walks over to the table to sit down, taking a pen and scrap paper and begins writing the words, "For quite some time- ," which is all we see of the text. While she writes, Leann offers to open the door for Claire's mother who has come downstairs to dispose of the dead lizard (figure 11). Thus, unlike Frank's letter to Walker, the atmosphere in which Claire writes is somewhat open, and unguarded. But the context in which Claire drafts her letter is secondary to its content, written as a public statement with the clear intention of destroying Frank's political career as well as his relationship with Claire. Derrida, as we know, contrasts speech and writing by emphasizing the breach unique to writing between what is intended to be conveyed and what is actually conveyed. In writing a letter to her husband, a sitting President, that is tailored to the act of speech - or more accurately for the Underwoods, of speech as performance - Claire closes this gap. The written word becomes the spoken word. The personal becomes detached. Claire asks Leann to deliver the letter "to the President," not to "Francis," the name she has always given to her husband. Speech in the Derridean sense of "auto-affection" is collapsed into writing. The written letter, with its detached mode of delivery, its declarative tone written to be spoken, becomes a symbol of distance and divorce.

The letter, in other words, like that of Frank's letter to Walker, embodies the act of writing becoming one with speech, albeit through differing modes. Frank's sequence utilizes the voiceover, the abstract spoken words of his conscience printing itself on the material paper.

Claire's sequence is eerily silent, except for her mother killing the lizard. In both instances it is the act of writing as speech - and of speech as performance in particular - that distorts and collapses the Derridean distinction. As Goldstein notes, both Frank and Claire thrive on the notion of performance. The spoken word employed as performance is crucial to an understanding of both character's thirst for power over others. The letter to Frank is written as if it were a speech being delivered to the news media because the threat of divorce becomes that much more real, more powerful, when read to the world (Goldstein 2016). Claire's letter could have stipulated that if Frank refuses to support her then she will leak to the media her intentions to divorce him. Instead she writes a guarded, formalized statement that is highly impersonal when compared with Frank's letter to Walker. Claire's letter, like most actions by and between Frank and Claire, is an iteration of power, an attempt to catch out the other and level the political and marital playing field.

We see a structural breakdown in the notions of speech and writing as they are conveyed in both letter sequences, then. The similarities in the treatment and significance of writing in both of these instances are important, but perhaps even more so are their differences. Frank's letter sequence is five full minutes long, filled with complex angles and artfully composed shots that emphasize a synchronicity between the written and the spoken word that produces the effect of marrying the two forms neatly together. While we hear the voiceover accompanying smooth dolly shots of Walker reading the letter while on a stroll through the woods and Frank sitting in the White House typing, multiple perspectives are used to emphasize the impact of both the written and spoken word. Claire's sequence, by contrast, lasts just over 30 seconds, underscoring the absence of heartfelt emotion in her treatment of divorce. The fact that more time is given to Frank's attempt to win over a President than Claire's threat of divorce is symbolic of both

characters' prioritization of political power over personal harmony. Though the letters represent separate attempts to 'dupe' the recipient into complying with the writer's desires, they are startlingly different in their execution and tone.

Figure 11. *Without a private study in which to compose her thoughts, Claire writes in the company of others.*

Derrida's notion of writing is pertinent to both letters. If writing, in contrast to speech, is systematically troubled by the gap between the intended meaning and the meaning conveyed, then Frank's letter is a prime example of the ways in which the distinction can be collapsed to reveal the nature of writing as a form of power. J. Hillis Miller, as we shall see, traces this connection in Derrida between words as they relate to "things, powers, persons," and "figures of speech" (Miller 1985). As we have seen, Frank appeals to Walker's emotional side - a facade to hide the true meaning: his intentions to usurp the presidency. The Derridean notion of writing as

exhibiting a gap between meaning intended and true meaning is therefore present in Frank's letter. And yet, as we saw, the sequence is shot in a way that binds both speech and writing together. Claire's letter is designed to scare Frank by threatening divorce, and is delivered by Leann with instructions to deliver the statement on Super Tuesday. Unlike Frank's letter to Walker, there is no disjoint, no gap between intended and true meaning. The message as Claire intended it is clear: deliver a statement of divorce intentions on a day that determines the vote in certain key swing states that will have devastating effects on Frank's campaign and career. What binds speech and writing together in Claire's letter is what separates it in Frank's: the language, which is written to be understood as a speech. In this regard, both letters violate in several ways the traditional distinction between speech and writing that Derrida outlines in the second chapter in *Of Grammatology*, albeit using opposite methods.

vi. *Symbolic Power*

As we have seen, logocentrism for Derrida is not only a product of the binary between speech and writing but one constituted by a system of first principles (Derrida 2016). We saw that the hallmark of speech is its proximity to the principles upon which Western thought is built, in contrast to writing, which is doubly removed from such principles. The opposition between speech and writing is subject to the same dissemination - the "indefinite loss of meaning" - as the opposition between light and dark, or authority and vulnerability (Derrida 2016). The opposition between presence and absence is pertinent to the contents of Frank and Claire's letters; the function of both are dependent on what they don't say as much as what they do. Frank's motive is to displace Tusk as Walker's primary ally in his ambitions to remain president, yet neither

Tusk nor the President's allegiance to another are mentioned at all. Claire's formal declaration in the form of a note written on a piece of scrap paper is striking for its nonchalant disregard for, or absence of, their entire history. Brunette suggests that the tropes of presence/absence in an analysis of a visual text is crucial to our interpretation of them (Brunette 1987). In the two letter scenes examined in *House of Cards*, the presence/absence binary works to define and destabilize one another. The presence of emotive language and personal history relating to Frank's childhood in his letter to President Walker serves the dual purpose of hiding, or making absent, the true malicious motives undergirding the letter while simultaneously elevating, or making present, Frank's loyalty and friendship. The presence of formal, impersonal language in Claire's letter highlights the absence of love and kinship. In this respect, the presence/absence motif helps to expose the gap between intentions conveyed and one's true intentions that for Derrida is essential to the act of writing, historically distinguishing it from the "pure bodied" nature of speech (Derrida 2016).

Importantly, both letter scenes studied here come at crucial moments in the narrative that call for precisely the special effect that Mittell views as integral to the complex narrative. This call to "reboot" is delivered in two contrasting displays of an exercise of power. For at the heart of the act of writing and speech in both scenes is the pervasive threat of a shift in power. The concept of performance is key to the display of power in both letters. Frank performs a rhetorical posture in his letter to Walker, seeking to win the President's trust by playing the "loyal friend." If Frank was on the back foot before, the power shifts dramatically in his favor once Walker reinstates his faith in Frank to whip up votes. Claire's purposeful distancing from Frank - a causal threat that would at the very least destroy Frank's viability as a candidate, her reference to him as "the President" - all serve to underscore her independent power, reinforcing a sense of self-

sufficiency and success beyond her husband. The letter is as much for Claire as it is for Frank: a sign of autonomy that ruptures the central power partnership in *House of Cards*, which has been deteriorating across several episodes.

Acts of writing such as these that reinforce the written word's equal status with speech personify what Derrida calls "symbolic" power (Derrida 2016). Within the opposition between speech and writing that Derrida seeks to collapse are a complex system of "diffusions" that retain different meanings for both concepts. These include "ideological, religious, scientific-technical systems" that are muddied in the written word (Derrida 2016). The discrepancy, for example, between the Word of God as written in the Bible and the Word as spoken by God is widened by the very act of writing it down (Derrida 2016). Frank's exploitation of intended meaning and true meaning in his typed letter to President Walker is itself an exertion of power. The sense of "power and effectiveness in general," Derrida writes, has "always been linked to the disposition of writing" (Derrida 2016). The potential disjoint of meaning inherent in the Derridean notion of writing is present in Frank's letter, and collapsed, through a merging of speech and writing, in Claire's letter. Both letters, therefore, are an example of what Derrida calls "symbolic" power. A deconstruction of speech and writing in these two scenes in *House of Cards* thus exposes the power of writing to destabilize the logocentrism Derrida saw as "plaguing" the Western historical tradition (Derrida 2016).

CHAPTER TWO

Macro: Textuality and the Direct Address

i. *Overview*

In the final scene of the last episode of *House of Cards* to date (S4E13), Frank and Claire face a hostage situation in which two young members of the militant terrorist group ICO (Islamic Caliphate Organization) threaten to execute an innocent man live on national television. The fourth season builds up to this moment with multiple scandals both domestic and international, such as Lucas Goodwin's attempted murder of Frank, journalist Tom Hammerschmidt's (Boris McGiver) reopening of multiple charges against Frank, and the detainment of an Islamic prisoner of war, Yusuf Al Ahmadi (Farshad Farahat). It is this final narrative thread that leads us directly to the hostage situation, as tensions reach a climax between ICO and the US. The Presidential cabinet sits together in shock as the terrorist execution of the American occurs on screen, at which point the fourth season comes to a close. As important as the narrative content, however, is the way in which the terror is presented. For there is a moment in the very final shot of the episode, before the cut to black and the credits, which reveals a rich site of discussion. The action cuts from the large screen in the situation room showing the execution to Frank and Claire, symbolically side by side willingly for the first time in the season. Frank then looks down at us and says, "We don't submit to terror. We make the terror." This is a classic instance of the show's trademark direct address to end on. Only this time, Frank's eyes are joined by Claire's as

the fourth wall is broken by the weight of both characters' gaze for the first time in the entire series. It is the goal of this chapter to provide a logocentric critique of moments in *House of Cards* such as these that powerfully employ the direct address to narratively striking effect.

House of Cards has built a fanbase dedicated to speculating about events to come in future seasons. Despite the claims that the current Netflix model of placing entire seasons down at one time extinguishes the potential for 'water-cooler talk,' or the causal theorizing over the events of 'last week's episode,' showrunner Beau Willimon is confident about the effectiveness of the model, as revealed in an interview with the *Washington Post*. "A lot of people have brought that up with me...I don't know why, because we're already well beyond that. There is no water-cooler moment," Willimon remarks (Goldstein 2013). A significant portion of the show's attraction and social media hype can be attributed to its establishment of various trademark narrative devices that set the show apart. These include the on-screen text bubbles, the notoriously complex marital and professional relationship between Frank and Claire, and, perhaps most striking of all, the use of the direct address. The present chapter seeks to employ the logocentric analysis of the two letter scenes undertaken in Chapter 1 to the direct address as it is utilized in *House of Cards*. I shall build on the Derridean ideas used in the discussion of speech and writing to answer several questions in this chapter. These include: What is the relationship of complex television (and specifically the operational aesthetic) to a breaking of the fourth wall? To what extent does the treatment of speech differ from that of writing in a discussion of the direct address? Finally, bringing together the previous two questions, what does an exploration of logocentric ideas in the direct address reveal? We can begin with a brief overview of the direct address in the show before looking at the historical roots of the technique. We will then be in a position to discuss Derrida's ideas in conjunction with the direct address in greater depth.

ii. *Direct Address*

We saw in the relationship between speech and writing that the narrative in *House of Cards* relies to a great extent on the addressee's knowledge of events and motives. In Frank's letter to Walker the addressee is ostensibly the President, but the words are often spoken to us in a direct address. Aside from Frank's letter to Walker, however, Frank's thoughts are relayed to us one-on-one, in a series of addresses that serve to give us a small yet valuable piece of Frank's conscience. The old adage that knowledge is power is tested every time Frank turns to speak to us; by feeding us hidden information via Frank, the narrative implicates the audience in his sly machinations, revealing the malice and manipulation behind even his seemingly benevolent acts in the show ("Generosity is its own form of power," Frank tells us in the first season). The direct address in *House of Cards* not only calls to our attention the inner workings of the narrative by developing a unique relationship between character and audience; it also serves to distort the Derridean relationship between speech and writing.

Poststructuralism grew out of a rejection of structuralist claims to objectivity and stable meaning. As Culler has said, the poststructuralist "skeptically explores the paradoxes that arise" in the pursuit of a "hidden order" and stresses that her own work is "not science but more text" (Culler 2007). For example, Barthes's method in *S/Z* is to perform a type of analysis that resembles the Derridean tendency to collapse the meanings in a text by exploring the text's "difference from itself" (Culler 2007). That is, both Barthes and Derrida seek to violate a traditional mode of writing that assumes a structural coherence by revealing the ways in which the text "outplays the codes" on which it relies (Culler 2007). For Derrida, as we saw, this is

facilitated by the identification of individual moments in a text that in some way dissolve or "decompose" the narrative (Derrida 1985). We have seen that Frank's letter to Walker represents a pressure point in the text of *House of Cards* in that it exposes a chasm that troubles the distinction between speech and writing within Derridean logocentrism. A similar technique is on display in Claire's letter to Frank. Speech collapses into writing, and writing into speech, suggesting an overall volatility in their relationship as they are presented here. The two scenes we have looked at so far are not the only points of reference in *House of Cards* susceptible to a logocentric reading. The direct address offers a fruitful site of inquiry in the show that distorts the traditional power dynamic between speech and writing.

The various instances in which Frank breaks the fourth wall are quintessential fragments, or symptomatic points, in the narrative that invite the potential for multiple impasses of meaning. These are moments in which the text exposes what Barthes calls its "second language," highlighting subtle power plays between Frank, the characters on the show and, most effectively of all, the audience (Barthes 1987). These moments for Barthes amount to a separate language within the fabric of the narrative, one that "floats above the primary language of the work" (Barthes 1987). We shall see how these moments in *House of Cards* engender instances in which the operational aesthetic is at play. For the notion of text as construct is pushed to the fore in part by creating irony between what the characters know and the information being channeled to the audience by Frank (Mittell 2006).

The direct address has historically been seen as a facet of drama that attempts to unify character with audience. However, there is a discrepancy in the ways in which the technique is manifested between stage and screen. Tom Brown, in his book *Breaking The Fourth Wall*, suggests that the technique as used in film or television plays on the adage that the eyes are the

'window to the soul,' and thus takes on a new power when that gaze is fixated onto a single audience on screen (Brown 2012). The unity between character and audience that is established by the cinematic direct address is a result of the personal gaze (eye-to-eye contact), forming a relationship that is arguably of immediately greater intimacy with the audience than the theatrical monologue in which the gaze is diffused or oriented to a few eyes at most. Nonetheless, the direct address has been used in both art forms to great effect, whether to facilitate our understanding of events, to deceive us, or simply to explain the reasoning behind a character's actions. For example, when Ferris (Matthew Broderick) in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986) tells us why he simply cannot go to school that day, he variably addresses us and looks out the window at the blue skies. "How could I possibly be expected to handle school on a day like this?" Ferris says, before the action cuts to multiple shots of clear skies outside the window from his perspective.

The direct address as a dramatic technique has a long history in the dramatic arts. According to the historian Neil Croally, the ancient Greek 'Chorus' served in one respect as an omniscient narrator for the audience, embodying the "collective voice" that is purposefully different in class, race and religion to the onlooking Athenian audience (Croally 2008). Like Frank in these moments, the Greek chorus stands to a certain extent outside the narrative, looking inwards with us. Similarly, Bertolt Brecht crafted the dramatic narrative in a way that frequently allowed characters to step outside the narrative and address the audience. Many point to the ways in which monarchs or members of the royal family in Shakespeare's historical dramas would, often momentarily, allow the audience in on certain motives behind a character's actions. Most famously, perhaps, this technique is used to powerful effect in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in which the scheming mind of a monarch wronged by his fellow men is laid open to us in asides

ranging from two lines to entire verses. It was somewhat fortuitous, then, that Kevin Spacey, playing the wronged politician who lets us all in on his malign intentions, came to the first season of *House of Cards* having just finished a touring run as the title character *Richard III*. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Ian Crouch notes that Frank in the pilot of the show looks us in the eye, "Angry and emasculated...swears revenge, and promises delicious and scandalous things to come" in almost identical fashion to Shakespeare's monarch. Frank divulges, in effect, what Richard tells us: that he is "determined to prove a villain, / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (Crouch 2013). Both Frank and Richard, too, use the direct address for purposes of dramatic irony. In *House of Cards* dramatic irony is used to the point at which we become so cognizant of Frank's motives that we can almost predict his next target (the excitement of the narrative shifting from the question of '*what* will Frank do next' to '*how* will he do it,' reinforcing the operational aesthetic within the diegesis). Placed in the hands of Kevin Spacey, the direct address takes on a sly, almost creepy tone to it in which we see many parallels to the character of Richard: forever scheming and orchestrating tricks verbal, political, and amorous.

The direct address as explored in both Shakespeare's Richard and Willimon's Frank in *House of Cards* thus employ similar motifs of power and personal ambition. Further, as a formal device in and of itself, it highlights a chasm in the relationship between speech and writing. For a direct address is one that is ostensibly spoken to us, yet one which has always been essentially written (and written to be spoken in particular). We can examine several examples in *House of Cards* that highlight this movement. The first example arrives in the very first scene, in which Frank speaks to us while strangling a dog. The second example is the scene immediately after this in the show's chronology, the White House New Year's Party, where Frank gives us the lowdown on the key political players in the show who hold the desired keys to power. We will

then jump to the other end of the series to two scenes in the final episode of the fourth season. Our third example of the direct address will be an instance in which Frank speaks to the camera but, unlike our previous examples, addresses multiple audiences - not just viewers of the show. These three examples will provide the groundwork for an understanding of how the direct address is used in *House of Cards*. Our final example will revisit the scene that opened this chapter: an example that breaks tradition in the show's use of the direct address by involving more than one character breaking the fourth wall. A discussion of the direct address as it relates to the logocentric divide will allow us to see the technique as situated within a discourse of power that runs through both the narrative and the formal content of the show.

iii. *Establishing the Direct Address in* House of Cards

The first time Frank introduces us to Washington, D.C. he identifies each of the key players and their relation to his role as Chief Whip - how President Walker has tapped into a movement Frank seeks to sabotage, how Linda Vasquez (Sakina Jaffrey) holds the keys to the White House and therefore must be kept close. The direct address is used early on as a way of decompressing the narrative, pausing to breathe for a moment while Frank indulges us. As the series progresses (and in the third and fourth seasons in particular when the challenges and frustrations of Presidential power begin to catch up to Frank) the direct address becomes noticeably more 'strategic' in nature. The device is used often to divulge Frank's plans to escape a certain threat, be it Conway, his dissenting cabinet or, most poignantly, Claire. In this light, the final scene becomes all the more powerful as a symbolic unifying moment for the couple who only several episodes prior were on the verge of divorce. The final totalizing gesture, both eyes to the camera

and the line, “We make the terror,” is given extra weight when we consider the accumulation of threats made against the Underwoods (by Zoe and Peter Russo in the first season and those by Conway and Dunbar in the fourth season) and Frank’s many addresses to us in response to them. In this respect, the function of the direct address evolves as Frank’s position comes under increasing threat from outside forces, requiring a continual shift in strategy while remaining a space in which Frank can confide and disclose.

iv. *The Direct Address as Reprieve from the Action*

In the first minute of the show’s pilot we see Frank, who is getting ready for a New Year’s Eve event, step outside his home to attend to an accident in the street nearby. His neighbor’s dog has been hit by a car. Frank and a member of his security detail walk over to the dog before Frank tells his security to see if his neighbors are home. We are alone with Frank for the first time as he appears at first to comfort the dog’s pain. Frank then begins to speak, at this point to no clear audience. The pilot script (made public after the release of the first season) contains the following lines: “There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain. The sort of pain that’s only suffering. I have no patience for useless things” (Willimon). Frank’s eyes meet the camera at the line, “I have no patience for useless things” (figure 12). He proceeds to kill the dog (below frame), deliver several more lines away from the camera, and then one more to the camera: “There. No more pain.”

Figure 12. *“I have no patience for useless things.” Our first encounter with Frank as he puts the dog out of its misery.*

We noted earlier that, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida details how Western tradition has distinguished writing and speech by their association or ‘proximity’ to the first principles. Writing, as we saw, implicates the originary breach - the gap between the intended meaning and the meaning conveyed. Derrida attributes this in part to the fact that writing is historically seen as an act of deferral (Derrida 2016). Writing, Derrida says, defers meaning from primordial speech, which is the true symbol of mental experience (Derrida 2016). When Frank speaks the words “I have no patience for useless things” to the camera for the first time, the text reveals itself not only through the character’s acknowledgement of the camera, but through the written word being conveyed to us as though it were the pure “body” of speech (Derrida 2016). The written takes on the form of “auto-affection” historically reserved for speech. Via Frank’s gaze we become

inescapably bound up in the narrative. "The audience," Sebastian Arcelus (who plays the character of Lucas Goodwin in the show) has said in an interview, "is implicated in his actions throughout the series" (Arcelus 2014). We are guilty by association because Frank informs us of his plans as he goes along. Yet breaking the fourth wall also gives the viewer a sigh of relief, as Constance Zimmer (playing Janine Skorsky) remarks. Frank, enemy to most and ally to few, "becomes your friend" (Zimmer 2014). The element of cordiality established by Frank's address to us is a core feature of the direct address that scholars have identified in Elizabethan drama. Ric Knowles, writing in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, argues that the technique of introducing a personal bond between character and audience is prevalent in the theatre of the period (for example, in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*) and is employed to explore the ways in which characters "are really just like us" (Knowles 2006).

The relationship this first scene in *House of Cards* establishes with the viewer is one from which we cannot remove ourselves. To extract ourselves from the equation removes the element of speech crucial to the speech/writing binary Derrida seeks to dismantle. For Frank's words spoken only to other characters on the show repeatedly play on this core aspect of the notion of writing as one that plays on the gap between intended and conveyed meaning. Unless he falls prey to unforeseen circumstances that force him to adapt, each interaction Frank has is preconceived, deliberated and highly political in its motives. The direct address extinguishes and collapses the intentional gap in the relationship between speech and writing by brandishing a real sense in which Frank, like King Richard, is giving us a precious piece of his true self.

Figure 13. *Often a quick glance at the camera tells us just as much as a monologue.*

v. *Direct Address as Setting the Stage*

Knowledge, then, is not only power but, when shared with the audience, a basis for audience-character kinship. Frank lets us in on the secret, while guiding and performing for us in a display of control. For in a similar way to *Richard III*, the direct address in *House of Cards* gives us the impression that its protagonist is as much the author of the text, the metteur-en-scene, as the show's creators. Whether events are a product of his scheming or not, Frank's performance becomes a display of narrative power to influence relationships (for example between Congressman Russo and his constituents). The development of multiple simultaneous plotlines via the introduction of key players in the narrative (Doug Stamper, President Walker, Chief of

Staff Linda Vasquez, etc) are woven in neatly by Frank in the second scene, the New Year's Eve party (figure 14). Notably, those he introduces in this scene are in positions of greater power than Frank, and thus are identified as targets (of Vasquez: "When it comes to the White House, you not only need the keys in your back pocket, you need the gatekeeper."). As Frank talks to us while weaving through the crowd, characters become his puppets (of President Walker: "Do I like him? No. Do I believe in him? That's beside the point."). Throughout the scene, the tone is colloquial and friendly. The tone with which he delivers the first lines to us, "There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain. The sort of pain that's only suffering" is strikingly nonchalant, establishing an intimacy that caters to the sense of trust being established between Frank and the audience. We see Frank's true colors because he allows us to. In this respect, the notion of speech as performance in our discussion of the letters is fully manifested in the direct address. Through their blasé yet authoritative tone, these first addresses to us plays on the notion of Frank as author of the narrative and both draws attention to and exploits the apparatus of the text, exposing the narrative as what Mittell calls a "constructed" entity (Mittell 2006).

Figure 14. *"Welcome to Washington"*

These two examples of the direct address display one way the technique is used early in the series: its use in a monologue style to introduce first Frank's character before explaining the narrative setting at the New Year's Eve party. The act of breaking the fourth wall is a technique that is prevalent in the fabric of the narrative, occurring in some cases multiple times per episode. Are there specific identifiable moments in which the direct address tends to feature? And how, if at all, does the technique change across the show's seasons?

Frank's repeated address to the camera can seem somewhat sporadic, especially when we consider the settings in which they take place. The direct address is used variably during conversations over lunch, alone in his office, or while sitting in on a cabinet meeting. To look for consistency in location, however, would be to miss the mark. Instead we find that the direct

address is utilized most commonly during moments or episodes in which Frank's power status is jeopardized. When a character gets in the way of Frank's ability to exercise his will effectively or when a potential threat emerges, he turns to us. An answer to the question of 'when' the direct address arises, then, may point to moments of possible weakness, in which confiding in us to articulate his intentions might aid his ability to follow through. For his power lies in part, as we saw, in his ability to perform for us, as well as to execute his plans successfully. For example, when Zoe threatens to reveal her source to the media towards the end of the first season (thus threatening Frank's ascent to the White House), Frank turns to us in the mirror and says, "I have zero tolerance for betrayal, which they will soon indelibly learn." A man of his word, Frank proceeds to push Zoe in front of an oncoming train in the first episode of the second season. At the end of the same episode he looks at us in the mirror once more, "Did you think I'd forgotten you?" (Figure 15). The threat is alleviated, for now.

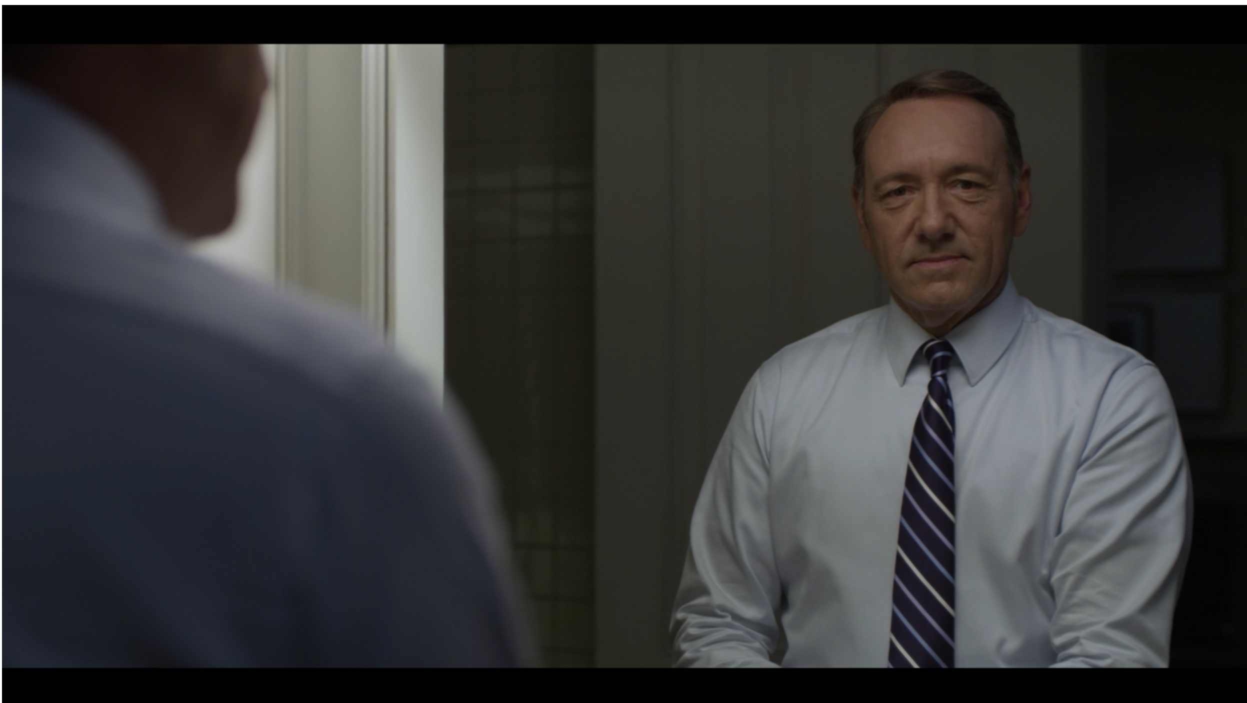


Figure 15. *"There is but one rule. Hunt or be hunted. Welcome back."*

The end of the third season sees an assault on the Underwood establishment by Heather Dunbar, Frank's opponent in the race to win the Democratic primaries. Dunbar attacks Claire on the campaign trail, and Frank takes it personally: "She can go after me all she wants but if she goes after Clare I'll slit her fucking throat in broad daylight." Here the direct address is used to display the personal nature of Dunbar's attack and the ruthless lengths to which Frank is willing to go to protect his and Claire's legacy.

A final, perhaps more subtle instance in which we see Frank turn to us at a time when his power is threatened is during a long, allegorical sequence whereby certain characters play a constructive role in his imagination. A power figure who becomes a significant threat to Frank's Presidential campaign is Governor Will Conway. In the seventh episode of the fourth season, Frank invites us to "imagine a duel." In one of the most elaborate addresses in the show to date, we see Frank walking down the main hallway in the White House with the Presidential portraits hanging on the wall on either side. At the other end of the hall is Conway, pointing a gun directly at Frank. Frank explains that "Conway has a powerful gun" in the search engine Pollyhop, but that Frank has an even more powerful one in the NSA. Clearly he sees Conway as a more significant threat than he lets on in the show. For these reasons, this more elaborate direct address tells us that Frank is seriously concerned about Conway as an opponent, unlike Dunbar. His fear is manifest in the reluctance to use his executive powers as President to "rig the election:" for a weapon like the NSA "could blow up in my hand and that's why it's plan B." The direct address, then, becomes an avenue of strategizing, of thinking the game over before he draws himself a hand, all the while continuing his bond with the viewer.

vi. *Breaking the Traditional Fourth Wall*

Frank makes multiple speeches to the camera that are both addresses to us and to a fictional nation. The routine operation of the White House dictates that these speeches be written prior to their delivery. Thus in the larger context of the political system in which the characters work, the act of writing becomes the first principle from which speech results. For example, at the beginning of the third season Frank's newfound power as President of the United States is immediately mitigated by his cabinet's decision to search for another candidate to run in the 2016 election. This results in a speech delivered to the nation announcing his decision not to run for President in the upcoming election. But as Doug says, we know "he's bluffing." This gesture is reminiscent of the episode before, in which Frank writes a letter to Walker that taps into the logocentric gap between intentions conveyed and his true intentions (to run for President). It is the written word here that dictates the meaning conveyed to the nation, and the written word too that serves to underscore his true intentions to run that Doug detects. The breach inherent in the act of writing is utilized in our third example, Frank's address to the nation which, delivered as speech, inverts the traditional hierarchy by making the voice the channel through which the original written word and its superficial meaning is conveyed.

Despite seeing Frank and Claire at two very different points in the show's fiction, the first and last scenes of *House of Cards* to date engender a rare and powerful solidarity between Frank and Claire. Within the first minutes of the pilot, Frank, having murdered the dog, washes his hands and zips up the back of Claire's dress before looking at her and muttering, "stunning." The action then cuts to the couple kissing (incidentally the first and last real kiss we see Frank give Claire in the entire show) before Frank takes our hand and talks to us while wandering through the jovial

New Year's crowd. By contrast, in the final scene we are facing a hostage situation that has gone horribly wrong. While two hostages have been found, a third remains within the hands of two teenagers professing to be a part of the militant group, ICO. They broadcast the execution of the third hostage live on the internet, forcing the world to watch - and submit to - ICO's statement of terror. But only minutes prior to this, Frank and Claire also announced to the world their own statement of terror in a live address. Frank speaks to the camera, but this time we share the words with the rest of the nation: "We are at war. It will be a war more total than anything we have waged thus far." Cut back to the very final scene, and we are with the entire Presidential cabinet in the situation room, waiting to watch the live execution of the final hostage (figure 16).

Figure 16. *The on-looking cabinet, preparing for the worst. From the point of view of Frank and Claire.*

What is immediately striking about this scene, which lasts for 62 seconds and consists of 2 set-ups and a total of 4 shots, is the absence of the eerie variation of the *House of Cards* theme from the soundtrack which until this point has been running throughout the entire episode. During Frank's address to the nation, for example, a chorus of non-diegetic violins and cellos begins to play beneath his words two thirds of the way through. But in the final scene we hear only the voices of the teenagers pledging allegiance to Allah in Arabic overlying the withering sounds of the hostage choking on his blood. We have the first shot, wide, from the perspective of Frank and Claire at the end of the long table that encapsulates the cabinet facing the screen, on which we see the hostage on his knees facing the camera with his hands tied behind his back. The second and third shots come in quick succession, totaling 10 seconds, first a cut back to Frank and Claire from the opposite end of the long table (2 seconds) and then back to the streaming of the

execution, this time filling the entire screen for 8 very long seconds: words are uttered in Arabic, a knife is drawn to the hostage's throat, and we cut to the final shot of the season at the very moment the knife cuts through the skin. The fourth and final shot is by far the longest, lasting 44 seconds. We are now back on Frank and Claire, a replica of the second shot from the other end of the table only this time it is a slow tracking in shot. The margins of the frame are taken up by members of the cabinet variably watching the action on the screen and looking away. (Most notably Tom Yates, the writer now acting as speechwriter and companion to Claire, sits to Claire's immediate right, the last person we see before we are left with Frank and Claire). Frank and Claire in this final shot look visibly less disgusted by the execution than those around the table. Frank's subtle, disinterested gaze left and right as the camera approaches suggests a marked attempt to display indifference towards the events unfolding on screen. As we approach the couple, the pledging voices begin to wither in shock and merge with those of the dying hostage. The sound is muted at Claire's command as the camera creeps to a slow stop about two feet away from the couple. Frank's eyes then meet the camera. He leans forward and delivers the words, "That's right. We don't submit to terror." Despite these two lines being spoken to us through a direct address, Claire clearly and unexpectedly reacts to them by looking at Frank as he speaks to us. Frank proceeds to turn his head to meet Claire's eyes. Then, in a final glance that secures their bond in an unprecedented move for the show, both Frank and Claire turn their heads back to the camera as Frank delivers the last line to us: "We make the terror." This time, both pairs of eyes gaze back at us, Claire breaking the fourth wall for the first time (figure 17). A two second pause. Cut to black.

Figure 17. *The Presidential seal watches over the couple as Claire joins Frank for the first time by looking straight at us.*

This act breaks tradition in the series in several ways, not just in Claire's acknowledgement of the camera. Her glance symbolizes for the first time in recent episodes a unity of purpose that is all the stronger for the fact the message of "terror" is a product of both of their motives. Frank wields a totalitarian power in the final episode of the fourth season by vetoing multiple cries (for example a direct rebuttal to the suggestion from the CIA head that the terrorists should be brought back alive for possible intel). What is arguably most evident about the power plays in this episode is the complete disregard of the voices of others who seek a pacifist route. The Underwoods knew the hostage would be executed on live national television, hence the declaration of "total war." The execution acts as a perfect excuse for the Underwoods to make a symbolic grand gesture that will distract the nation from the onslaught of political allegations coming from Tom Hammerschmidt at the *Washington Herald* that implicates Frank in the

murders of Peter Russo and Zoe Barnes, as well as a number of other devastating crimes. In this respect, the statement of war is itself an act of speech, a symbol of performance as a response to a threat to the couple's political legacy more than to their country.

Equally striking about these final scenes and the delivery of the lines to the camera are the ways in which it equates the notion of power with words. For Frank makes his declaration of war through Tom Yates' written speech, then delivers it as a speech. But the power stems from the written words on the page, the words that are then relayed through the teleprompter to speech. We have three media through which the writing engenders speech, then. The traditional boundaries between speech and writing as illustrated by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* are thus inverted. Speech is the element in the equation that becomes a derivate of writing. Logocentrism states that the unity with one's own thought begins with speech, and yet here the message of power begins with writing, not speech. Frank and Claire have an agenda that is embodied in the written word, and relayed through speech during Frank's address (one written, notably, by Tom, troubling the notion of authorship here). The logocentric gap between speech and writing is not closed, as it was in both letter sequences; rather, the hierarchy is overturned, the written becomes the "pure auto-affection" of meaning (Derrida 2016). In an inverted gesture to the logocentrism Derrida articulates, the direct address during Frank's speech to the nation sees the spoken word become slave to the written.

vii. *Levels of Power*

It is not until we reach the very final shot in the fourth season that we begin to see once more the unity of speech with writing embodied. The spoken word is employed as a symbol of power

that no longer fosters a unique relationship between Frank and the viewer. The line, “We make the terror” simply reinforces what Frank has told the world in his address. Now the inclusion of Claire ruptures the intimacy of contact established by the direct address in the pilot. Here we see a shift in the relationship between writing and speech hinged on the notion of power. Peter Brunette has argued that “authority and power constitute themselves through logocentric, oppositional hierarchies” like the dichotomy of speech and writing (Brunette 1987). The direct address utilizes the authority of words and raises them to the authority Derrida sees as afforded to speech by the canon of Western thought. The “representation of the relations of words to powers,” J. Hillis Miller has said, will inevitably turn out to be “one or another figure of speech” (Miller 1985). The direct address in the final shot acts as a reiteration of motives through a merging of speech (to the camera) and writing (of the script) which, unlike the letter scenes, hides the act of writing. The stream of consciousness, ‘off the cuff’ feel to the direct address isn’t as present in this final shot as it is when Frank muses on “useless things.” The direct address as exploited by the writers in the script of *House of Cards* forces us to consider the relation of power to words both written and spoken. Turning to us, Frank stakes a claim to ‘write’ the show’s narrative through the spoken word. The two episodes we have looked at here show examples of the ways in which the direct address destabilizes the relationship between speech and writing by attempting to merge the two forms, instances that Derrida might argue beckons to their natural unity over hierarchy.

This chapter has sought to deconstruct the use of direct address in *House of Cards* as it relates to the hierarchy of speech and writing. In the process of analyzing the multiple ways it is presented in the show - whether as a tool for setting the stage or for strategic power play - we have seen the technique pushed beyond its traditional boundaries. Our final example is unique

not only because it breaks tradition, but because it stands as a formally jarring moment in the genesis of the narrative. A revision of a recurring pattern, Claire's glance embodies an invite into Frank's single stable domain of power. The defining feature of the direct address has until this point been its ownership by Frank. The 'truths' he tells us repeatedly throughout the series in his short asides are no longer exclusively his own. What we are looking at with this final shot moves beyond a deconstructivist reading of the direct address. The analysis in this chapter has brought us to a nexus between the audience's access to knowledge, the formal devices that convey that knowledge (i.e. the direct address), and power. Power is clearly a theme that resonates throughout the show's narrative. A deconstruction of the direct address through logocentric terms has shown the theme of power to transcend the narrative content. In a welding of form and content, power is embodied just as forcefully on the formal level of the show: a technique that allows the operational aesthetic to become apparent and which I argue affirms *House of Cards*' status as complex narrative television. We are forced to question the weight of the words - the truth behind them - when Frank speaks to us on screen. The final shot therefore can be said to thrust upon us a possibility that brings us back to the tenet of poststructuralism that denies the existence of a single, stable meaning: that the truths uttered to us throughout the show have merely been those of Frank. Or, in other words, that the 'knowledge' in the show we gather from Frank's scheming is a series of what has come to be called 'alternative' facts - those born of the psyche in an individual mind endorsed only by its own prejudice. We are forced to question, therefore, what understanding or 'knowledge' in the show really means. And it is when we confront these questions that we find ourselves again in the realm of a post-truth society: *House of Cards* dramatizes a modern extension of the plurality of meanings insinuated by the poststructuralists and postmodernists with which this thesis began.

CONCLUSION

Meta: Deconstruction and Complex Narrative Television

i. *Overview*

Chapter 1 offered a logocentric reading of two scenes in *House of Cards* that we saw troubled the traditional hierarchy of speech and writing. In Chapter 2 we applied a similar framework to an iteration of the operational aesthetic embodied in the use of direct address. In particular, we noted how the theme of power in the show manifested itself on both a narrative and formal level. In my conclusion I seek to take a final step back to look at the ways Derridean logocentrism and its insights suggest a pattern in complex narrative television as a whole.

The discussion here will draw from two shows: *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, Netflix, 2011) and *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers, 2016). Exploring the repercussions of an urbanized digital society bombarded with new media, Charlie Brooker's anthology drama *Black Mirror* presents *Twilight Zone*-esque mini-narratives that explore our reception to, and embrace of, the 'screen.' As a visual text, the show forms a sophisticated commentary on the nature of communication that again distorts an understanding of the written and spoken modes.

By contrast, our second example text, *Stranger Things*, combines supernatural elements with a narrative placed within the context of an eighties midwestern rural town. In an age in which high production-value television has saturated the market, *Stranger Things* stands out as that now-rare phenomenon of the word-of-mouth hit. This is perhaps due in part to the strength and appeal of

its central troupe of characters - a band of primary school kids - who make it their mission to rescue the missing Will Byers from what appears to be dark forces infiltrating reality from another dimension (known in the show as the Upside Down). It is when the two dimensions begin to communicate with one another that a fruitful discussion of the notion of communication via specific instances of speech and writing can be opened up and explored.

I will draw on moments and themes in the shows that belie similar chasms between speech and writing that were detected in *House of Cards*. I shall also extend the theme of knowledge as it relates to speech and writing in both shows in order to underscore its close relationship to communication. By the end of this conclusion we will be in a more robust position to answer the question: to what extent can the ideas in this thesis be said to be facets of complex narrative television as a whole?

What my deconstruction of Derrida's concept of logocentrism in *House of Cards* has uncovered are the various ways in which modern complex television transcends its narrative borders. Derrida seeks to rebalance the logocentric hierarchy by emphasizing the centrality of writing in art. Writing, at least as much as speech, exposes the artwork's form - the principles governing its construction. In the first chapter of *Of Grammatology*, we see a systematic dismantling of the so-called unassailable first principles that support this hierarchy (Derrida 2016). Speech and writing are tools of communication that expose the text for what it is - an artificial medium of knowledge. Embedded in the complex narrative is a level of awareness that "transcends," according to Mittell, "the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers" (Mittell 2006). But Mittell wrote this in 2006. It can be argued that the techniques that blur the boundary between speech and writing, and text and spectator, have become less of an exception in modern narrative television and more a common pattern within it. A project that

seeks to prove the centrality of logocentrism across complex narrative television would require a comprehensive study of a large number of shows from the past two decades, and is thus beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I argue that a pattern - specifically, a pattern involving the concepts of speech and writing in their various forms - can be glimpsed from even a brief look at several shows that vary in budget and genre. An exploration of this pattern leads to a fruitful commentary not only on the relationship between speech and writing, but their implications for human communication and understanding.

We have seen that the direct address obfuscates the logocentric distinction by both inverting and unifying its components. In a reading of Rousseau's philosophy, Derrida notes how speech is valorized as a mode that uniquely "exceeds and comprehends language" (Derrida 2016). In one respect we have seen how writing's relationship to speech in *House of Cards*' use of the direct address "exceeds and comprehends language" in a way that corrupts the traditional hierarchy. Understood in this regard, the direct address, too, is seen to "exceed" the limits placed on it by the conventional narrative in which the drama occurs *in front* of us. The use of direct address shifts the narrative dialogue so that it speaks *to* us.

I shall test the logocentric divide in complex television by exploring alternative modes of 'writing' in *Black Mirror* and *Stranger Things*, as contrasted with the writing of letters in *House of Cards*. Derrida's conception of writing, we can recall, concerns not only the physical act of inscription but writing generally, a mode of communication that in *Black Mirror* takes the form of a screen and in *Stranger Things* a series of lighting patterns. We therefore move away from the narrow conception of speech and writing as involving the human voice and pen to paper to test the logocentric divide in distinctly modern examples of the terms. As our forms of communication evolve at an ever faster pace, the hierarchy of communicative modes changes

also. Texting becomes a derivative of email, 'Tweeting' an outgrowth of text. The examples of complex television explored here display these changes while simultaneously providing a commentary on their implications. With our logocentric discussion of *House of Cards* always in the foreground, I shall analyze the ways in which *Black Mirror* and *Stranger Things* speak to the hierarchy of speech and writing.

ii. Black Mirror *and the Death of Human Interaction*

Black Mirror has become an anomaly among streamed television series if only for its insistence on a singular, narratively self-sufficient format. The series can be viewed as an example of complex narrative television for various reasons. The first is the show's repeated allusions to its status as a constructed text. Episodes of *Black Mirror* such as 'Fifteen Million Merits,' 'White Christmas' and 'Nosedive' contain a theoretically rich mythology that gestures to the text's "narrative mechanics" by questioning the role of the technology we use to learn about and access the show (Mittell 2006). In a streaming arena dominated by long-form, often slow-paced serial dramas, *Black Mirror* carves out its place as a self-consciously dystopian episodic series created with a view to jolting us into questioning the very media we use to watch it. I shall take from the most recent season to date, Season 3, and the first episode, entitled 'Nosedive' (2016).

The episode builds a mythology around a woman, Lacie Pound (Bryce Dallas Howard), who yearns (like every other character) for social approval via a 5 star rating scale system. Smartphone in hand, every personal interaction Lacie and the other characters experience has the implicit purpose of gaining a score as close to 5 as possible. These interactions also include social media updates, like posting a photo, which people can also rate out of 5 to boost one's

overall personal score. So when Lacie uploads an aesthetically pleasing photo of her morning coffee (which she doesn't drink - the point being a coffee purchase is undertaken for its potential as a social media tool rather than a beverage to be consumed), she increases her score by attracting multiple 5 star ratings which boosts her average by several points (a technique borrowed from Uber's driver and passenger rating system). But when Lacie accepts a smoothie from a colleague at her workplace who is riding a 3.2 average she is immediately rated negatively (3 stars or below) several times by others who see her interaction with the lowly 3.2. Those with 4.7-or-above ratings are labelled 'elites' (figure 18). So when Lacie is asked by her childhood friend Naomi (4.7) to be the maid of honor at her wedding Lacie jumps at the prospect of gaining approval from all the elites present at the wedding party who could boost her score of 4.2 up to a 4.5 - thus making her eligible to buy her dream house. The entire episode follows Lacie's desperate attempt to gain a statistical social validation and, in turn, a home. The tragedy, of course, is that a series of events leads to her score being downgraded so low that Naomi refuses to have her attend the wedding. The remainder of the episode sees Lacie's descent to becoming a social 'lowlife.'

Figure 18. *In this point of view shot of Lacie's screen, she focuses on elite status: 4.7 and above.*

'Nosedive,' like every other episode of *Black Mirror*, troubles the relationship between humans and digital media by realigning the ways in which the two communicate with one another. In 'Nosedive,' the primary means of communication is via one's personal screen, which in almost every frame is exemplified by a human utilizing digital media of some kind (Lacie's brother in a VR headset, coffee shop customers glued to their devices, etc). The act of writing, or "ideographic inscription," then, comes in the form of a swipe right on the smartphone's touchscreen (another technique borrowed from contemporary social media, this time from the popular dating app Tinder, in which you swipe right to denote interest in someone). When Lacie

is outwardly friendly to the coffee shop barista, the approval is recorded, or ‘written,’ into the device via a swipe, translating into an immediate inscribed 5 star approval.

Derrida uses the word “inscription” in *Of Grammatology* with reference to just one form of writing: the physical act of placing pen to paper. Yet as we have noted, the use of the term writing encapsulates more than placing pen to paper. In ‘Nosedive’ the mode of communication is driven by an inscription of a different kind: the input of data on a screen. The notion of writing as inscription is one that Foucault saw as embedded in the incarcerated society’s claim to power. For when we reign over a thing or being we naturally “imprint” ourselves upon them. As Judith Butler writes in her essay ‘Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions,’ “it seems that the very mechanism of “in-scription” implies a power that is necessarily external to the body itself” (Butler 1989). The act of writing becomes a process of cultural construction - one that Butler views as “a logocentric move if ever there was one” - whereby the inscription is an inflection of power. In *House of Cards* we saw the act of writing as its own power play: an attempt to manipulate the President’s sense of trust or a declarative threat between husband and wife. In ‘Nosedive,’ the power inherent to the act of writing is reversed, the writer (or ‘inscriptor’) - in this case Lacie - becoming a slave to the technology that mediates the communication.

In this respect, in ‘Nosedive’ the traditional logocentric relationship that places speech above writing is reversed. Whereas in Frank and Claire’s letters we see the two forms collapsed into one, here the act of inscription becomes the “auto-affection” to which speech strives. The swipe right is a personal act of affirmation or distaste that accords with an individual subjective experience, inscription becoming what Husserl calls an instance of “pure subjectivity” (Husserl 1989) (figure 19). The speech act is usurped by the gesture of the swipe, an act of writing augmented for its social powers. The swipe gesture also has the added capacity of engendering a

sense of achievement. Every time Lacie receives a positive rating we - the audience - breathe a sigh of relief with her, and all of a sudden we join her as servants to the technology. ‘Rating’ as the act of writing is given high status in the show, while speech is demoted as secondary (for example, we note the lack of any substantial dialogue in the coffee shop - the action revolves around Lacie’s response to what is occurring on her device). Speech is absent unless it carries some utility, i.e., the goal of yielding a positive rating.

Speech, by turn, is suppressed. ‘Nosedive’ overall assigns a lowly status to speech. Lacie’s painful ‘maid of honor’ address is chaotic, logically incoherent and vulgar in contrast to the clean, logically ordered treatment of writing embodied in the touchscreen. The best man’s speech, while coherent, is notably superficial, like the majority of interactions in the episode between Lacie and those she is outwardly attempting to please (such as the woman in the elevator, who detects her mundane ramblings and punishes her by giving her 3 stars). The episode ends with Lacie and a prison inmate screaming at one another until the words merge into inscrutable noise. After almost an hour of status-obsessed attention to the screen, this scene has a cathartic effect for both the characters and the viewer. Lacie and the inmate yell at one another in a way that can be seen to reflect the senseless screaming that comprises the ubiquitous social media rant: all noise, little substance. This is what the system amounts to, Charlie Brooker tells us here. Speech, when disregarded in favor of an essentially empty form of writing such as the rating of a photo of coffee, results in emptiness.

We might also be inclined to view the swipe right as a form of speech, since the device both inscribes and projects a message (for example, it ‘tells’ you that Lacie gave you 5 stars). Speech in ‘Nosedive,’ then, also takes on the form of an unspoken gesture. Further, speech in the episode is valuable only insofar as it results in a positive written response that boosts one’s social status.

Our capacity for communication reduced to an irretrievably superficial rating system, we see a degradation of speech as it is represented by Brooker in 'Nosedive.' The notions of speech and writing thus show a disturbance of logocentric premises in the episode's mythology that not only questions the relationship between the two but our very capacity for their use in a high-tech, materialistic world.

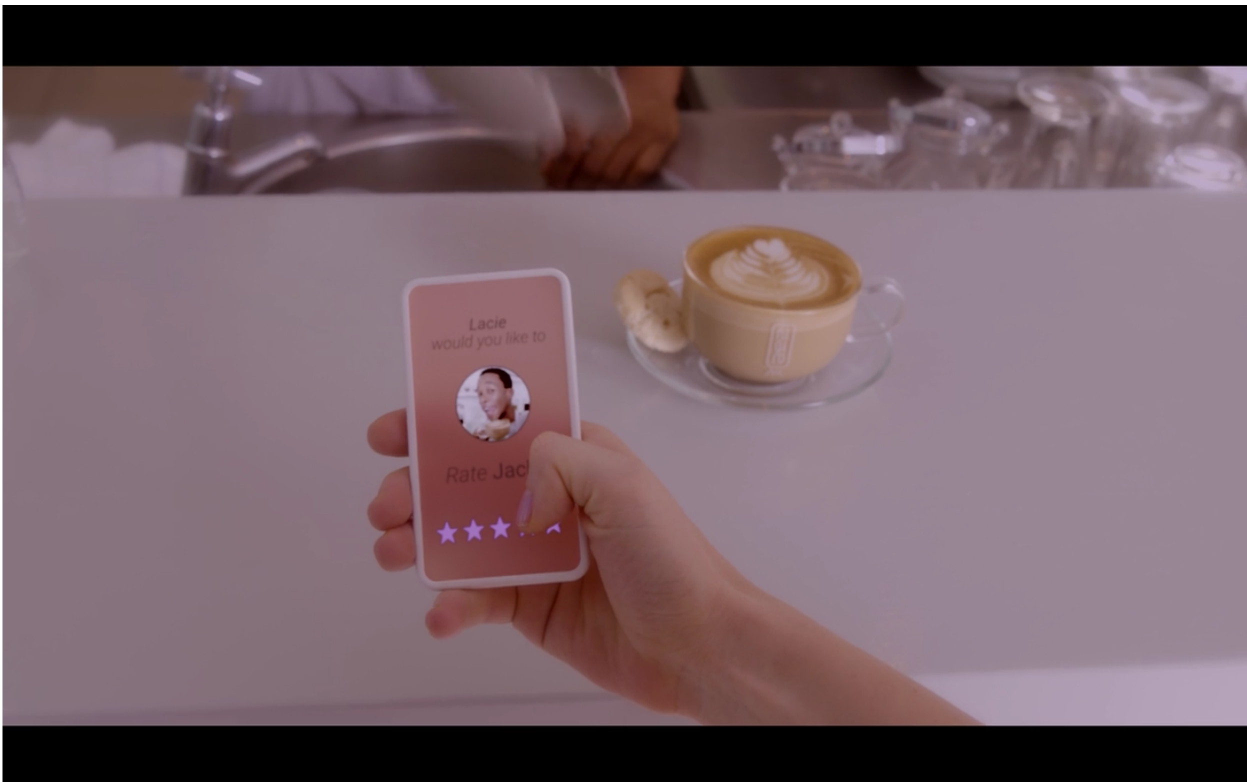


Figure 19. *The 'swipe right' and star system fuses techniques borrowed from the Uber and Tinder apps.*

iii. Black Mirror*'s Operational Aesthetic*

Several narrative features of the episode, including the centrality of human communication through digital media, highlight our own interaction with the blank screen, or 'black mirror,' in

front of us. From both a thematic and formal standpoint, 'Nosedive' is reflexive, calling to our attention the ways in which the story is being told while playing on the prevalence of social media and the centrality of the screen. In this regard, the operational aesthetic is pervasive in the episode in that it forces us to acknowledge the ways in which we consume digital media and technology. For example, the text draws immediate attention to itself at the opening of every episode by forcing us to consider each episode's temporal setting. Are we in the future? Or just a twisted present? The lack of temporal signposts in an episode such as 'Nosedive' forces us to acknowledge several differentiating cultural norms - for example, not being able to rent a decent car without a 3.2 personal score, or buy an upmarket house without near-elite status.

The third season of *Black Mirror* was released in full in October 2016, and marketed on multiple forms of social media including Facebook and Instagram. The show's success rests in part on its proliferation across the digital channels that an episode like 'Nosedive' implicitly denigrates. In other words, by implicitly commenting on the pervasive and potentially destructive nature of digital media, the show draws attention to itself as the product of the very media it disparages. The show embraces a kind of happy duplicity by self-consciously binding its status as a text to the apparatus that created it. The irony that arises from consuming the content on the visual channels that the show demonizes (such as the smartphone screen) serves to reinforce the fact that despite the warnings it evinces we continue to consume the content. The show's attempt to step outside of its medium is manifested in a powerful visual at the opening of every episode by 'cracking' the black mirror (and the title 'Black Mirror') in front of us (figure 20). In an intelligent use of the operational aesthetic that draws attention to the essential paradox at the heart of the show's narrative, *Black Mirror* follows in the poststructuralist tradition of

confronting the inevitability of the text "embarrassing its own ruling system of logic" (Eagleton 1990).

Figure 20. *The trademark* Black Mirror *'screen crack.'*

iv. *Speech to Writing in* Stranger Things

Another example of a complex narrative that disturbs the relationship between speech and writing and confronts its own textuality is Netflix's hit series *Stranger Things*. Unlike *Black Mirror*, which utilizes the anthology format by presenting new scenarios within each episode, *Stranger Things* employs a purely serialized narrative by cultivating an arc that extends the length of a series (and beyond). The show follows the disappearance of the young Will Byers

one night after he loses his friends on his way home, and the subsequent appearance of a girl named Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown). Will's friends, along with Police Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour), lead the search for Will as a series of suspicious events lead them to a nearby laboratory. Eleven, we learn, escaped from the laboratory, in which doctors experimented with her supernatural abilities. The first scene in the series shows us how this same lab has an experiment go horribly wrong when scientists opened up a portal to an alternative dimension. This dimension - the Upside Down - is identical to reality save for the dark, rotting features embellishing it, giving it an 'underworld' feel. Every scientist that enters the portal ends up being devoured by a monster that is now haunting the nearby town of Hawkins, Indiana. Will's mother, Joyce (Winona Ryder), receives phone calls in which she claims to hear Will trying to speak to her, before the phone is mysteriously electrocuted. When the lights begin to flicker around her house she is convinced it is Will's way of trying to speak to her.

This communication marks a crucial moment in the season, reaching a climax when Joyce (who at this point is perceived by the entire town to be going insane) installs hundreds of colored Christmas lights around the house. It quickly becomes clear to Joyce that Will's attempt to speak between the two dimensions is best aided through the lights, and to facilitate this Joyce sets up Christmas lights on the wall that correspond to an alphabetical grid (figure 21). It works, and Will is able to issue a warning to his mother by lighting up the letters individually to spell: R-U-N.

Figure 21. *Mother and son work together to communicate with one another.*

The theme of communication in the narrative of *Stranger Things* is theoretically rich throughout, whether through the kids' ongoing struggle to communicate with Eleven or the various scientifically unorthodox attempts to reach the Upside Down. However, the moment at which Will speaks to his mother via the alphabetically ordered lights complicates the relationship writing has to speech in part by troubling the authorial distinction between writer and speaker. Joyce writes the letters of the alphabet on her wall and places a light above each of them, a framework that Will uses to facilitate an act of speech. By spelling out the individual letters he simultaneously partakes in an act of writing. If Joyce provides the page, Will becomes the inscriber, writing and speaking to us at the same time by choosing the individual letters to relay a specific message. The 'voice' of Will Byers at this moment is thus a fusion of communicative

acts that pertain to the quality of *logos*, or speech, as being "infinite and self-present" highlighted by the voice's immateriality. The "self-presence" of speech is distinguished from the auto-affection of the spoken word, according to Derrida - a framework inverted and unified by deconstruction (Derrida 2016). The two logocentric forms once again morph into one act. For just as Will speaks, he writes. The narrative forces Will to communicate through multiple channels - electricity, Christmas lights, the alphabet - which force his voice to become displaced and lacking (literally) the pure "bodied" relation to speech (Derrida 2016). Speech and writing in this sequence are dissolved into an abstract 'voice' that forces a unity in the relationship between the written and spoken word.

What can we make of the theme of communication as it is presented in these two complex narratives? We can again turn to Foucault to aid an understanding of the ways in which Derrida's logocentrism is caught up in conversations of power. In one respect, the aforementioned instances of speech and writing in complex television have been culturally appropriated: the letter via the 'authentic' typewriter, the ratings system within the digital software of Lacie's superficial world. Foucault, in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," describes the surface upon which the inscription takes place as itself a site of power (Foucault 1977). For Lacie, this power subordinates her to the status of a low-life by an obsessive desire to live a particular kind of life. In *Stranger Things* the inscription on the wall embodies less a sign of power and more one of weakness: Will's body (to borrow from Foucault's language) is reduced to mere *phoné* whereby the spoken word is secondary to his ability to communicate with his mother. The act of speaking thus exhibits a simultaneity with writing.

v. *Logocentric Patterns*

We have explored several examples of complex narratives that suggest a struggle between speech and writing, ranging from specific moments like letter writing to rating photos of coffee. These samples suggest a pattern across complex narrative television that, while no means a product of a systematic study, nevertheless clearly engage in a dialogue with logocentric premises. What, then, does this tell us about the nature of modern complex narrative television and its status as an increasingly 'cultural' phenomenon? Each example we have explored represents a lacunae in the narrative in which the act of writing comes into conversation with the way speech acts are presented. The deconstruction employed to elucidate the various lacunae is, we have seen, uniquely Derridean, yet chosen so that the reader (or spectator) can better discern the ways in which the text speaks to itself - moments in which the text "undermines its own rhetorical structure" (Derrida 2009).

Will Byers' voice and Claire's letter to Frank sit within highly contrasting narrative arcs yet display in their own ways a commentary on the relationship between speech and writing that simultaneously exposes a textual self-consciousness. The instances we have explored that reveal a distinction in the relationship between the written and spoken words have invariably led us to a consideration of the ways the written word violates its traditional derivative, inferior space. In several examples of complex narratives we have seen the logocentric relationship inverted, as the written word rises above the voice to guide the narrative. Mittell defines complex narrative television as a fusion of multiple techniques working in tandem to produce content that is uniquely sophisticated and easily distinguishable from conventional narratives. It has been the goal of this analysis to forward and dissect several moments that both trouble the concept of logocentrism and speak to aspects of complex narrative television in a way that shows them

working in concert with one another. For there exists at the heart of narrative complexity a logocentric chasm that we see constantly pushed to the foreground by the operational aesthetic.

vi. *The Streaming Market Today*

The analysis in this thesis began by forwarding the suggestion that a pattern is emerging in modern complex narrative television that invites a discussion of a text's internal structure. We saw the identification of such structures aided by the narrative tool known as the operational aesthetic. By using a range of narrative tools (including the operational aesthetic) that draw attention to what Sconce calls the metareflexivity of a text, we saw how *House of Cards*, *Black Mirror* and *Stranger Things* demand in their own ways that we acknowledge their essential constructedness (Sconce 2004). The quality of exposing and emphasizing the formal details of a text is, as Mittell notes, a core feature of modern narrative complexity and is also a primary function of Derrida's deconstruction. For deconstruction uses textual structures to uncover meaning in a text: structures, whether in the form of oppositions, recurring images or hierarchies (such as between speech and writing) are highlighted by both Mittell and Derrida as sites of analysis (or "undecidability"). Through an exploration of core narrative features that comprise the basis of the two chapters in this thesis - primarily the various acts of writing and the direct address - I have sought to elucidate a trend in complex television that can shed greater light on the overall shift in television narratives towards a more self-referential mode of storytelling.

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested that *House of Cards* is a show that employs a unique approach to narrative, production and release. It is worth noting that although these approaches were relatively unique at the time of the show's release in 2013, they have today

become typical of modern television. It would be an oversight in a thesis of this nature to disregard the conditions from which the shows discussed have been able to succeed. It is perhaps no coincidence that *House of Cards*, *Black Mirror* and *Stranger Things* have in recent years all become Netflix shows (the streaming service bought the *Black Mirror* series from Channel 4 in 2015), and, further, some of the most popular series on television today. Each are products of their platform: Channel 4 originally sought to extend its dystopian bent on original content by employing the Guardian's Charlie Brooker to write *Black Mirror*, while Netflix continues to amass user data alongside algorithmic equations to determine the type of content to buy and produce - a system legitimized by the success of its guinea pig, *House of Cards*.

To better understand the environment in which these shows have been able to flourish, one can gain a clear picture by looking at Netflix's attitude to digital hegemony as exhibited from its business strategy. The company had remained largely secretive regarding both its budget allocation and revenue until 2016, making its vast streams of investment all the more surprising (see figure 22). To this day, Netflix refuses to place its viewing figures in the public domain, giving us little to measure the success of a show other than its potential to appear under the 'Trending' tab on its landing page. As Joe Nocera has noted in the *New York Times*, not only is Netflix highly reluctant to publish its full (financial and user) data, the little it has released suggests that it makes "very little profit" (Nocera 2016). The company releases series after series, telling the public with little data to back it up that its business model succeeds, citing the nearly 100 million people (as of early 2017) who subscribe to its service as proof of its success (Statista) (figure 23). Yet, if we have learnt anything from the ongoing case of Twitter (a platform with just under one billion users), it is that user popularity is not a marker of profitability. It might be suggested that Netflix's overall gesture towards secrecy, of data and

business remaining behind closed doors, is itself testimony to the hegemonic power it has carved out for itself as a lucrative nexus between the studios and independent production houses. At the very least, the promise to release a record number of original shows in 2017 paired with a highly aggressive growth strategy plays into the current speculation surrounding the existence of a volatile 'tech bubble.'

Figure 22. *Graph indicating the rapid growth of Netflix's stock price over the past four years.*

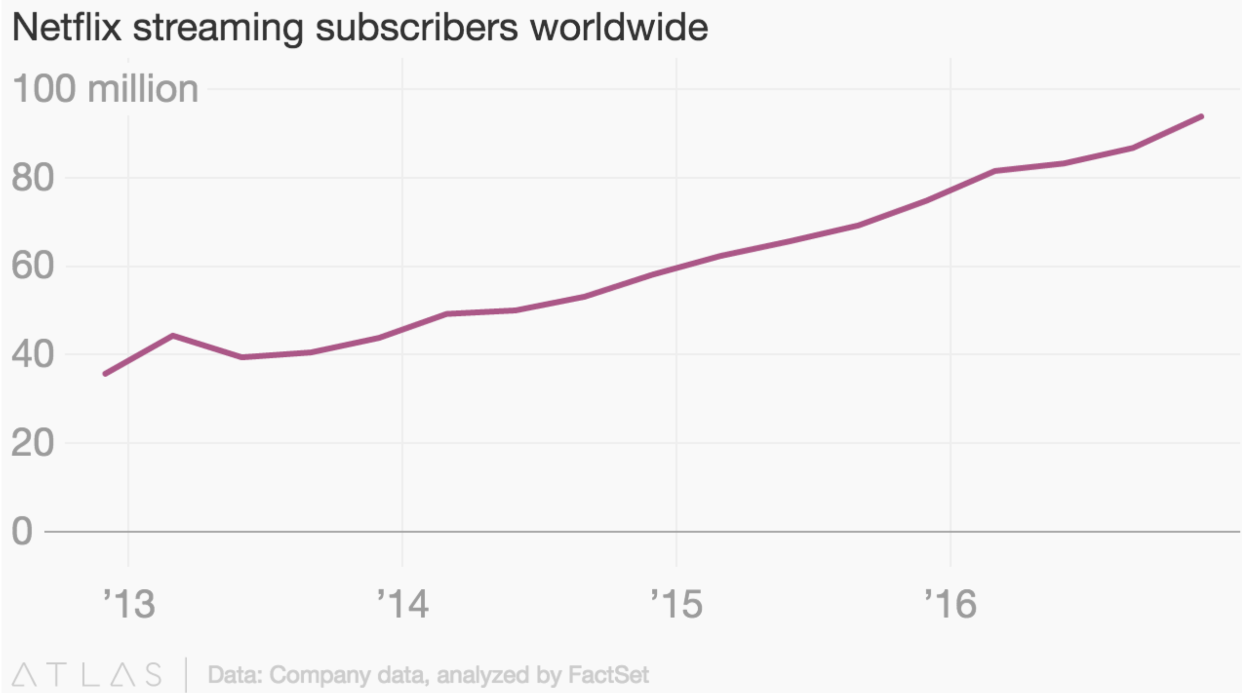


Figure 23. *Netflix is expected to reach 100 million subscribers by Q3 of 2017.*

However, tech houses and streaming services such as Netflix, along with media giants Amazon and HBO, are careful to assure that such power is wielded to the advantage of its customers. The argument is that with the increase in revenue driven by streaming and digital content, the major players are able to allocate higher budgets and therefore recruit higher quality talent to produce their content. Notably, with this shift has come an incentive to self-consciously steer away from conventional narrative formats. Instead, writers and producers are rewarded for purposefully pushing the boundaries and redefining narrative practices (see, for example, the recent HBO series *Westworld*, or the Netflix mystery-drama *OA*, which purposefully distorts the reliability of the guiding 'voice' of the narrative which, like Frank's direct address, forces us to question what constitutes as knowledge in the mythology of the show). It might be suggested that a hallmark of complex narrative television from the past decade (since at least the release of *Breaking Bad*) is

its experimentalism. One could argue that a truly contemporary definition of modern complex television might include, along with the traits described by Mittell at the beginning of this thesis, a tendency to realign the definitional boundaries of television.

While this thesis stakes no claim as a comprehensive study of modern complex television, I hope that it can play at least two roles within the avenues of further research. Firstly, that by providing a framework in which deconstruction - and logocentrism in particular - can be applied to a visual text, Derrida's work can begin to find a more popular voice in film and media studies. Whether an analysis entails a deconstruction of a filmic text, or a Derridean concept such as *différance* applied to 60s Westerns, it is hoped that the general canon of criticism can begin to embrace Derrida as a figure in whose methodology can be found deeply engaging perspectives for the subject. Secondly, and as an extension of this last point, while this thesis has sought to answer certain questions (such as, 'How can deconstructivist concepts be used to interpret complex narrative television, and what does an analysis reveal?'), our discussion has also led us to several questions that I hope can facilitate further scholarship. For example, as complex television evolves, to what extent does it open up paths for newer strands of theory (such as network theory) to step in? Does narrative complexity pave the way for different types of Derridean analysis? Finally, does the development of this relatively new visual paradigm demand a more inclusive, holistic approach to criticism, and if so what does this entail?

Perhaps a point of departure for such questions might begin with the observation that Derrida's own philosophy entails a uniquely interdisciplinary nature that allows for his ideas to be used across multiple texts and subjects. The development of new media and the rapid evolution of television narratives might, one can argue, demand a cross-pollination in theory not dissimilar to that of Derrida's interdisciplinary approach. As Warren Buckland notes in the introduction to

Hollywood Puzzle Films (2014), for media theory to progress it must reflect the synergy and consolidation occurring at the industrial level (Buckland 2014). For example, does a modern text such as a videogame benefit as much from a singular theoretical analysis as it would from an inclusive, multi-theoretical reading? What we see in Derrida is a conscious effort to practice a method of criticism that incorporates multiple theoretical frameworks: structuralism, semiology, deconstruction, etc. In new media theory this could involve, for instance, using complex systems or network theory alongside a queer reading of narrative techniques in virtual reality gaming. An embrace of pluralistic approaches to film and media theory such as this can, I believe, only bolster our understanding of the ways narrative and technological practices are shaping the tech and entertainment industries as a whole. For when we engage in such an approach we might be more readily equipped to answer the fundamental theoretical and industrial questions: those, for example, that query the extent to which we can still label the type of complex narrative being released today as ‘television’ at all.

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