The tv-series 'House of Cards’ shows political cynicism in its most extreme form, or does it?

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One scene in the newly released third season of House of Cards is striking, first of all because it isn’t very successful. At the very end of episode 4, president Frank Underwood speaks to a priest. He is apparently suffering from moral agony because of his own Machiavellian ruthlessness. Or, to be more exact, he isn’t, because after the priest has left him alone in the church, he spits a statue of Christ in the eye. When he tries to wipe the spit off so the priest won’t notice, the statue falls over and breaks. The blasphemy is total.

What is annoying about this scene is firstly that it isn’t a part of the main narrative about the power-greedy Mr. Underwood. Contrarily, it seems to be made to help the meta-narrative of the show: Its actual purpose seems to be to give the reviewers something to write about - "He spat on Jesus!!"

The meta-narrative

House of Cards tries to do two things at once. First of all it attempts to make a narrative about political cynicism. At the same time, it tries to be a cultural event. The show has to be something we talk about afterwards. This is seen in the small intimate dialogues Underwood has with the camera, which almost make us accomplices; it is seen when Pussy Riot is suddenly playing themselves in the show; and it is seen in scenes where Underwood spits on Jesus and pisses on his father’s grave. It is as if the sales-pitch of the show is written into the narrative itself.

The case is though, that the narrative about the cynical Underwood, and the scenes that offer themselves for the meta-narrative and the following debates about ‘what it says about us that we are so into this show’, in reality work against one another. Because what is cynicism? A quick definition says that it is to pursue one’s goals without consideration, not shying any means to get to them. The point is, that the scenes that in the most spectacular ways are supposed to show us how cynical Frank Underwood is, actually end up showing something entirely different. Just like in the small intimate dialogues, Frank Underwood is mostly just speaking to us when he is pissing on his fathers grave and spitting on

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Jesus. What he is saying is: “Look how cynical and amoral I am”. The problem is that it isn’t at all cynical to announce one’s cynicism. One doesn’t get anywhere closer to those ruthlessly pursued goals by doing this. Therefore, there is something forced and excessive about these scenes, and dramaturgically, they tend to become exhausting.

The debate about the show

When it comes to the debates about House of Cards and whether it can actually make populations hate politicians even more, it is obvious to compare the show to the once so popular NBC-series West Wing, in which Josiah Bartlet was the president the Democrats in the US could only dream of having. At once honest and wise, talented and totally moral.

On the surface, there are big differences between the two series. West Wing told us how politics could actually be a moral and honest practice; House of Cards on the other hand, tells us how politics are amoral and cynical power games. However, the interesting part is not this difference, but the fact that the two shows end up presenting exactly the same idea about what moral and honest politics could be.

As if to underscore that president Bartlet is a good guy, West Wing puts an extraordinary amount of energy in emphasizing that he is a Christian. Time and again we are told that he thought about studying theology instead of economics. And when we are given a money-shot to show us how deprived president Underwood is, he has to spit Jesus in the face. President Underwood is in many ways an exact photographical negative of President Bartlet; every single point is the opposite, but on the whole, we get the exact same picture.

The disgust

One can describe this opposite similarity by drawing on the ideology critique of Slavoj Žižek. West Wing depicts a democratic fantasy – a richly illustrated tale about how real democratic heroes act – which might never be fulfilled, but which inspires us and motivates us to fight for the ideals our society is built upon. House of Cards gives us something else, namely the perfect object for our disgust – Underwood himself – as the negative of the exact same fantasy. By disavowing Underwood, we can acknowledge the same order that Bartlet serves as an ideal figure for. In this way, there has to be an Underwood to make it possible to even believe in the somewhat one-dimensional Bartlet.

Much more than promoting more hate of politicians, House of Cards presents an opportunity to mitigate it by concretely giving our politicians the opportunity to negatively mirror themselves in Frank Underwood. This is almost a little ritual that plays out every time a new season of the series is released: A journalist asks a bunch of politicians, who readily answer that they think Frank Underwood
is a bad person and assure that they of course condemn cynicism and lack of moral.

Verfremdung

*House of Cards* is thus a sort of antithesis to Bertolt Brecht’s famous “Verfremdungseffekt”. With Brecht, Verfremdung consisted in the characters of a stage-play suddenly formulating their sinister intentions way too directly, which resulted in a certain effect of surprise and potential recognition. “I am a capitalist,” someone would for example say, “and now I will go and exploit my workers”.

*House of Cards* partly uses this tool in Underwood’s comments out of the screen to us viewers. There is however never anything surprising in these small outbursts. For example, they don’t say anything about the absurdity of the capitalist’s function as a capitalist or the politician’s function as a politician. Rather than create a productive alienation by which we see what kind of political system we have actually gradually created, such that we can change it, they create a reactionary alienation: As a more and more depraved and fallen figure – a man we can only distance ourselves from – Underwood gives us an excuse for letting the political system remain as it is.