

Beholding Beauty: Aesthetics, Style and Sensation in US Quality Television Political Thrillers

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Beholding Beauty: Aesthetics, Style and Sensation in US Quality Television Political Thrillers

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Michael P. Young

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ABSTRACT

Beholding Beauty: Aesthetics, Style and Sensation in US Quality Television Political Thrillers

This is a study about stylistic configurations in quality American television from the perspective of aesthetic engagement and focuses on the political thrillers *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2019). Using subjective aesthetic sensitivity as a starting point, this thesis entails considering debates from philosophy and television studies, specifically drawing on Kantian analytic aesthetics to focus on affect and televisual style. It further demonstrates how this focus can contribute to a unique evaluative methodology in the field of television aesthetics and a more nuanced reflection on thrillers' potential for exemplary aesthetic enunciation using three case studies. Arguing that television works have the potential to be art, this thesis uses close textual analysis to explore how the programme's stylistic and aesthetic choices work to induce thrilling sensations by their material manipulation of artistic elements and appreciates their achievements in terms of technical execution and sensuality.

The thesis makes new contributions to knowledge by i) closely engaging with the conceptual and practical aesthetics of television lighting by reference to industry terminology, production methods and information gleaned from conferences, industry publicity, festivals and trade journals about technical equipment; ii) its thorough exploration of recent US political thrillers in recognition of its gap in the literature and iii) its critical appreciation and wide-ranging reflection upon the philosophical foundations of television aesthetics, along with the epistemic perspectives and affective potentialities such explorations entail.

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Supervised by: Dr. Sarah Cardwell and Prof. Jonathan Bignell

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
LIST OF TABLES.....	X
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XI
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Background and Rationale.....	1
1.2 Research Questions.....	3
1.3 Aims.....	4
1.4 Terminology.....	5
1.5 Organisation of the Thesis.....	10
CHAPTER 2 – TAKING STOCK OF TELEVISION AESTHETICS.....	16
2.1 Reframing Kant’s Four Moments for Television.....	17
2.2 Surveying the Field.....	23
2.3 A Question of Quality.....	36
2.3.1 Discursive Approach.....	37
2.3.2 Generic Approach.....	42
2.4 Aesthetics and Affect.....	45
2.5 Political Thrillers – A Genre of Excess.....	61
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS.....	71
3.1 Research Paradigm.....	72

3.2	Rhetorical Structure.....	75
3.3	Phenomenological Inquiry.....	76
3.3.1	Befindlichkeit.....	79
3.3.2	Radical Reduction...Looks Strange to Me	80
3.4	Close Textual Analysis.....	81
3.4.1	Stylistic Analysis.....	83
3.4.1.1	Stylometrics.....	83
3.4.2	Evaluative Criticism.....	85
3.4.3	Aesthetic Appreciation.....	86
3.5	Purposive (Judgment) Sampling Criteria	87
3.6	Aesthetic Attitude	89
3.7	Organisation of Analysis Chapters	92
CHAPTER 4 - FINDING WAYS THROUGH <i>HOMELAND</i>		94
4.1	Looking With Light Lacking.....	97
4.1.1	Main Titles Sequence as Series Foreshadowing	97
4.1.2	Luminosity	102
4.1.3	Chiaroscuro	104
4.2	Political Thrillers: Luminosity in Action.....	110
4.2.1	Spying as Suspicion: Framing with Fictional User Interfaces	111
4.2.2	Shady Politics at Play.....	116
4.3	Characterising Carrie.....	120
4.3.1	Framing a Fractured Mind	125
4.3.2	Interiority.....	127
4.3.3	A Melodramatic Affliction.....	132

4.3.4	Breaking Down to the Bleats	135
4.4	Contemplating Duality	140
CHAPTER 5 – LOOKING THROUGH THE FACETS OF <i>SCANDAL</i>		148
5.1	Framing Doubt: Exposure; (Camera) Effects and the Sensation of Spying	151
5.1.1	Skeuomorphic Camera Materiality	153
5.1.2	Cinematographic Motion: Reflection and Refraction	156
5.1.2.1	Facing the Facts: Contrast, Balance and Colour Matters	158
5.1.2.2	The ARRI ALEXA.....	161
5.1.3	Balancing the Colour Scheme	165
5.1.4	Colour Symbolism in Costuming.....	167
5.2	Narrative Exposure and the Sense of Community.....	171
5.2.1	Morality, Politics and Twitter	173
5.2.2	Contextualising Colour	179
5.3	Olivia Pope and Sound Registers	183
5.3.1	Aural Cohesion in the Refrains of Sadness.....	186
5.3.1.1	Sonic Origins	189
5.3.1.2	Starting with a Sonorous Soundtrack	190
5.3.1.3	Hearing <i>The Light</i>	191
5.3.2	Did You Catch That? Dialogue and Pacing.....	194
5.3.3	Refrain From Thinking: Rhythm and Broadcast Breaks.....	198
5.4	Negative Affect and Authority	200
5.4.1	Spying as Unconcealment: Truth at Any Cost?.....	202
5.4.2	To Shonda Rhimes’ Credit.....	204
CHAPTER 6 – DEALING WITH A COLLAPSED <i>HOUSE OF CARDS</i>		209

6.1	Such Calculated Visuality	212
6.1.1	Colour Scheme and Visual Tone	214
6.1.2	The Cinematography of Eigil Bryld.....	219
6.1.3	Compositional Parallels with Vilhelm Hammershoi.....	221
6.2	Shaping the Structure.....	225
6.2.1	Breaking the Fourth Wall.....	228
6.2.2	Rebeginning with Adaptations.....	231
6.2.3	Netflix	235
6.2.3.1	An Algorithmic Aesthetic.....	237
6.2.3.2	Hyperserialisation.....	239
6.3	The Wright Claire Underwood	243
6.3.1	Stuck in Stilettos	249
6.3.2	And the Jazz Band Plays On	256
6.4	Picturesque Stillness	258
6.4.1	Control as Power.....	261
CHAPTER 7 – THESE THRILLING TALES: EVALUATING TELEVISION.....		270
7.1	Light and Colour.....	271
7.1.1	Darkness and Shadow	274
7.1.2	Contrast	276
7.2	The Form of Political Thrillers.....	277
7.2.1	Antiheroism.....	279
7.2.2	Comparing Characterisations.....	282
7.2.3	Who Knew Jazz Could Be So Thrilling?.....	285
7.2.4	Changing Trajectories	287

7.2.5 Resonances and Political Discourse.....	289
7.3 The Limits of Aesthetic Pleasure.....	291
7.4 Closing Credits	299
APPENDIX 1 – REFLECTIONS ON LIGHT, COLOUR CIRCLES AND THE CHROMATICITY DIAGRAM	302
APPENDIX 2 – PILOT STUDY: EXPLORATORY DATA ANALYSIS OF THE EDITING STRUCTURE IN <i>SCANDAL</i>	307
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WORKS CITED.....	336
FILM AND TELEVISION REFERENCES.....	387

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1 - Average shot length analysis of <i>Scandal</i> 's first exposure (S1E1).....	154
Table 2 - <i>Scandal</i> Season One episodes released between 5 April 2012 – 17 May 2012.....	315
Table 3 - Descriptive statistics of <i>Scandal</i> Season One episodes (in seconds)	315
Table 4 – Proposed aesthetic categories of analysis	325

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1 – Carrie interrogates Brody (S2E5).....	105
Figure 2 – Carrie stealthily convinces Brody to admit to the attempted Presidential assasination (S2E5).....	106
Figure 3 – Carrie spies on the President’s Chief of Staff Wellington (and illustrative of FUI) (S7E3).....	113
Figure 4 – Carrie taps into her manic state due to coming off her medication (S5E3) ...	125
Figure 5 – upon being denied reinstatement by the CIA, Carrie nearly has a breakdown (S2E2).....	128
Figure 6 – basic schematic visually representing the relations between the operant components of a camera (image taken from Moneymaker, 2020)	152
Figure 7 – Olivia strategising at OPA (and illustrating bevellation) (S7E11).....	156
Figure 8 – Olivia pondering in her office (and illustrating refractive double) (S1E3)....	158
Figure 9 – Olivia approaching Fitz in the Oval Office (S1E2).....	159
Figure 10 – Olivia drinking wine in her kitchen (S1E5)	159
Figure 11 – <i>Scandal</i> ’s general colour palette.....	160
Figure 12 – ARRI ALEXA dynamic stop range.....	164
Figure 13 – Olivia contemplating her next move in ‘TheWhite Hat’ (S2E22)	168
Figure 14 – Olivia murdering Vice President Nichol’s (S5E17).....	170
Figure 15 – S5E3 promo showing Olivia has abandoned her conservative clothing (ABC, 2015).....	170

Figure 16 – Olivia disapproving outside her apartment (S5E10)	171
Figure 17 – Olivia and OPA gladiators photographing their blood-splattered new client (S1E1).....	172
Figure 18 – Olivia decideing to break with Fitz (for the monent) while <i>The Light</i> is playing (S2E19)	194
Figure 19 – composition comparison with Hammershoi’s <i>Interior With Piano and Woman in Black</i> (1901) (image taken from Toby Wright, 2015).....	222
Figure 20 – composition comparison with Hammershoi’s <i>Interior</i> (1899) (image taken from Toby Wright, 2015).....	223
Figure 21 - text bubble on screen (Chapter 13)	226
Figure 22 – Claire and Frank break the fourth wall (Chapter 52)	229
Figure 23 – promotional still for <i>House of Cards</i> season 6 (Netflix, 2018)	248
Figure 24 – Cropped image of Claire’s posture whilst sitting and wearing stilettos (Chapter 43)	251
Figure 25 - colour wheel (a), colour solid (b) and cross-section of colour sphere (c).....	302
Figure 26 - digital camera chromaticity diagram with different manufacturer’s colour gamut modified from Arrighetti (2017).....	304
Figure 27 - light mode options on control panel for ARRI Orbiter (taken from ARRI, 2021)	306
Figure 28 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 1 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	316
Figure 29 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 2 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	317
Figure 30 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 3 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	318

Figure 31 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 4 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	319
Figure 32 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 5 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	320
Figure 33 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 6 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	321
Figure 34 – <i>Scandal</i> episode 7 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix	322

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

Undertaking a first degree in English with a minor in Philosophy (at a liberal arts college nestled within the gilded enclave of Southampton College of Long Island University) is mostly responsible for what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would call my ‘educational capital’. The literary curriculum was rife with ideas about the contrasting discourses in a changing media landscape, literary criticism and rhetorical devices, and the variety of textual analyses that focused on theories of what the text could mean as much as actual analysis.

While completing my higher degrees in Creative Writing and Mass Communications I developed my proficiencies in stylistic analysis, philosophical aesthetics and media literacy. Spaced in-between, I saw how lights in a screen, could, like a lighting a scene, bend space, time and reality. I saw how variations in their audiovisual texture produced sensations – strong, subtle, and sometimes strange – allowed me to discern nuances of style and beauty with respect to genre. Indeed, the correlation of their textuality with the ‘social dimensions of the production (and especially) the reception of [television] texts’ (Zborowski, 2016: 9) enabled a reflexive exploration of the subjective pleasures of such texts. The key takeaway from this brief background is to explicitly denote these formative proficiencies are the foundation for my formal interest in television programmes as aesthetic objects as they sensorially appear before me^[JB1]. What follows from this impetus situates my thesis firmly within the realm of television aesthetics.

As an approach that reflects on, appreciates and evaluates the style in the American television political thrillers *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards*, this thesis uses close stylistic analysis to explore their specific audiovisuality to discern what is so pleasurable about them. The programmes analysed form a loose but distinct grouping, selected with the following criteria in mind: a female lead, quality American production values, produced in the 21st century and falling within the political thriller genre. The first criterion recognises the dearth of female lead protagonists in television generally (Annenberg, 2016) and provides a space for them within my work. While this criterion is significant and represents a positive trend in television casting practices and female representation more generally, it is not the central theme of this work but I will explore how these female protagonists contribute to the exemplarity of the programmes.

Conventional television studies approaches tend to refrain from aesthetic questions and judgment, methodologically omitting them in favour of representational, theoretical, sociopolitical or ideological concerns. This represents an epistemological gap that has only just started to be seriously addressed, despite the successful return to stylistic criticism in film studies (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2016; Martin, 2014). An aesthetic approach therefore complements and extends existing television scholarship. This thesis firmly ‘acknowledges the roles of evaluation and aesthetic judgment to frame our research and drive [the] field’ (Mittell, 2009: 1) of television aesthetics. Accordingly, the thesis will be an original contribution to work showing the capacity of television for aesthetic achievement.

1.2 Research Questions

As a branch of television studies, television aesthetics' primary methodology of close textual analysis consists of stylistic analysis, evaluative criticism and aesthetic appreciation. Accordingly, my primary research question is formulated as

- How can television aesthetics enable an appreciative evaluation of 'strange' beauty in quality television political thrillers?

This research question designates my dual foci: the field of research and the elements of style (television aesthetics), identifies the precise topic of research (strange beauty), specifies the research modes (stylistic analysis, aesthetic appreciation and evaluative criticism); and gives the objects of study (US quality television political thrillers). In this thesis, strange is comprehended in the sense of being exceptional, distinctive or extraordinary (Rumsfeld, 2013). It aligns with the 'defamiliarisation' in arts scholar's Sarah Cardwell's discussion of American quality television (2007) and is closely related to philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1982) literary notion of *diférance* (difference or deferral of meaning), the 'uncanny' of Russian Formalists (Royle, 2003) and playwright Bertolt Brecht's theatrical 'estrangement' (Brecht, 2014). The secondary research questions parsed from the first are

- what are the programmes' goals and what are they trying to achieve?
- what formal techniques are they using and are they appropriate to their aims?
- how am I affected by them?
- How can an aesthetic reading of the programmes help to understand their potential impact on audiences, the development of the programme's conceptual themes and complement traditional television studies approaches?

However, before I can answer these questions, I will take a brief journey through the evolution of television aesthetics in chapter 2, from its fledgling beginnings through its contentious growing pains to its current state of play, to situate my work more precisely within the field's various strands and methods.

1.3 Aims

My interest lies where production and reception intersect: in the television work itself. This does not in any way suggest industrial or socio-political context is unimportant, but that an academic background in textual analysis and literary criticism has strengthened my aptitude for 'reading'. While textual analysis has been criticised for its 'reluctance to examine its methods and practices too closely' (Creeber, 2006: 85), Cardwell's clarion call 'for a stronger understanding of what close textual analysis means' (2006: 72) in television scholarship acts as aim for this eager television aesthete.

This thesis will also explore the aesthetic duality of cognition and affect through the concept of 'excess' as it is instantiated in the style of political thrillers, especially in terms of melodrama, performance, luminosity and sound. I will also show how the excessive expressivity is a crucial component in the structure of the genre and how its successful application produces aesthetic pleasure. My aim here is to encourage the reevaluation of other philosophical ideas that have been forgotten or devalued but which can productively contribute to viewer pleasure.

Beyond the methodological usage of close textual analysis, I am also concerned with issues of beauty, judgment, and affect, as my research questions suggest. Scholars, critics and viewers alike have noted a recent plethora of so-called 'quality' television programmes.

In this thesis, American quality television is defined as a programme that ‘exhibits potentially impressive characteristics...[and] an indication it is also good television worthy of study’ (Cardwell, 2007: 22-24). This project aims to develop, elucidate and test out such criteria. It grows from the spadework undertaken by the key proponents of an aesthetic approach to television, following from their intention and labour in further opening the field for students and researchers who want to think through the range of television programmes’ stylistic choices and achievements.

It addresses a group of programmes previously neglected by TV aestheticians: recent US political thrillers with lead female protagonists. This thesis will attend closely to what makes these programmes striking, thrilling and beautiful. My aim here is to encourage others to produce ‘research as experience’ by locating their experience ‘in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power’ (Neumann, 1996:189) to open the discipline and motivate others to share their perspectives and stories. By critically evaluating the style and appreciating the beauty in quality US political thrillers, the thesis will also be an original contribution to the corpus of television aesthetics.

1.4 Terminology

The notion of beauty I use hinges on a reflexivity derived from the aesthetic schema Kant explicates in his *Critique of Judgement* (2000 [1790]). Thus, this thesis relies on a preponderance of four ‘moments’ or modes of aesthetic contemplation – universality, disinterestedness, necessity and purposiveness – that, in a judgment of taste, recommend a beautiful artefact. Although Kant’s overarching trajectory culminates in a natural teleological

morality, my more modest concern is to share how I engage with television programmes' formal style and appreciate their sensory profiles.

Were I broached for a simple definition of aesthetics, I should not be faulted for saying 'the study of beauty'. Indeed, although our modern-day usage of 'aesthetics' was first coined by his contemporary Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 in relation to the affects of poetry, later defining it as the 'theory of the liberal arts, lower theory of cognition, art of beautiful thinking, art analogous to reason, the science of sensible cognition' (1954[1735]: §1), it is Immanuel Kant who is credited as 'the father of modern aesthetics' (Shaper, 1992: 368). In this third *Critique*, Kant systematically develops a theory of aesthetics based on the subjective reflection of objects judged to be beautiful or valued as art.

While the term 'aesthetic' had previously been defined as the experience of the senses, Kant belatedly conjoined this meaning with the narrower usage of Baumgarten, which continues today. Yet, Baumgarten's account is primarily cognitive, that is, he asserts that the value of art resided in its form as a type of epistemology and that its proper judgment was an evaluation of its clarity and perfection as a species of knowledge. Kant instead argues that the judgment of beauty is primarily reflective, that it does not contribute to knowledge and should not be confused with the cognition of objects in nature. Instead, aesthetic judgment 'represents the unique mode in which we must proceed in our reflection...with a view to getting a thoroughly interconnected whole of experience' (Kant, 2000: Introduction V).

For Kant, an aesthetic judgment is not subjectively based on an emotional or physiological reaction, but in the experiential relation with an aesthetic object. Accordingly, while aesthetic judgments are bounded by experience, they are the matrix of three concepts: taste, pleasure, and beauty. His taste is not sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 'taste [which]

classifies and classifies the classifier' (1984: 6) by using distinctions as a cultural signifier of one's economic or social status. Nor is it media scholars Newman and Levine's 'taste distinctions [that] reproduce dominant social structures' (Newman and Levine, 2012: 6). It is a judgment which states that the 'mere representation of an object is accompanied with satisfaction in me' and 'what matters is what I make of this representation in myself' (§2). It also demonstrates an aesthetic approach based on the subjective reflection of those programmes judged to be beautiful or valued as art. Derived from Kant then, pleasure is a sign of our relationship between an aesthetic object and beauty.¹

Attributing 'strange' to beauty as done in the primary research question may seem a curious compound construction but it serves to highlight the unexpected duality that has emerged as a theme in my aesthetic approach. This is not to denigrate the quotidian integration of television into the fabric of our everyday lives. Rather, it is an openness to looking at television from different perspectives to experience television in another way. This suggests seeing conventions in television production generally and in genre more specifically as a starting point for recognising innovation and exemplarity. Looking at the programmes this way permits me to appreciate how they play with genre and stylistic conventions that are often taken for granted and encourages viewers to question more imaginatively what they see. Thus, I argue that strange beauty makes visible the blind spots of television's conventions by disrupting the narrative and exerting pressure on the very conditions by which such a narrative can proceed.

¹ Dufrenne (1989) distinguishes between the work of art and aesthetic object. The artwork is a physical entity empirically in the world while the aesthetic object is the work as experienced, when its full sensuous potential is actualised.

This notion of strange beauty is legislative because Kant argues that ‘the feeling in the judgment of taste [that] is expected of everyone as if it were a duty’ (§40) is an enhancement of life while in the presence of art. The use of legislative is warranted since it is precisely to the extent we accept television programmes as works of art, replete with their own history, influences, styles, ambitions, conventions and techniques, that we can appreciate them on their own aesthetic terms. It also allows me to compare television works in the same genre and appreciate their strange sensations as being indicative of an expression of difference instead of simply dismissing them as confused, inappropriate or inchoate. Since this ‘beautiful [is] what merely pleases without any interest’ (§5) strangeness is not a property of the programme itself, but a feeling of pleasure occasioned by experiencing it.

To be completely transparent, I approach the programmes aware of the limits to my own subjectivity to the generalisability of television spectatorship. This thesis demonstrates the agency of an actual viewer – myself – and entails the utmost respect for the feelings and questions resulting from my experience of being ‘a participant in the process’ (Pribram, 1999: 163) while respectfully focusing on, being sensitive to and grounded in the aesthetic materiality of the work. As such, aesthetic is used to denote its duality as substantive and adjective. Thus, ‘materiality’ is the set of formal figurations, production values and editing techniques observable in television programmes.

Since the experience of the senses is subsumed under the term aesthetic, my textual analysis of US quality television political thrillers involves not simply describing the stylistic qualities of the programmes. It also appraises how well they communicate different moods, feelings and ideas. This affective reflexivity traces how ‘feelings are not just registered in our conscious awareness but [also how they] are felt and enacted by our bodies’ (Gorton,

2009: 65) in relation to the sensory expectations of political thrillers. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, the affective profile of political thrillers generally and their success as exemplary programmes depends on how well they balance the horizon of narrative events (Perkins, 2005) with style and meaning.

Television studies has rightfully shown that the reading of a television text's hermeneutic codes as embedded ideological myths is one way of interpreting the relationship between viewer and the television text (Bignell, 2019; Fiske, 2011, Newcomb, 2007). Such approaches, though, do not vitiate the aesthetic materiality of the text on which such ideological discourses are constructed. Thus, I posit that one does not only merely read television texts. One is also affected by them, and one cannot read affects – one must experience them bodily.

The usage of terms describing the sensate are notably, but unsurprisingly, inconsistent in the literature. Some scholars use the terms affect, emotion and feeling interchangeably, while others carefully distinguish the three. The situation is further complicated by equally nebulous lexemes such as sensation, mood, and sense. This thesis uses Noel Carroll's taxonomy of the affective dimensions of art which regards 'the entire realm of feeling-charged mental states as the affective domain [...] reserving the label emotion for those episodes aptly characterized by cognitive theories of emotion' (2003: 524). Accordingly, I enact an aesthetic attitude attuned to the elements of style which orientates my body to the impingement of corresponding affects and emotions. The affective sensations and emotional responses associated with strangeness, variegated though they may be, result in pleasure via beauty.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

Chapter 2 will review the relevant literature and elucidate the key concepts and scholarly debates which inform my understanding of television aesthetics as a philosophical mode of inquiry and its implementation as a methodological practice. As an interdisciplinary approach, I have woven together a narrative that liberally borrows ideas from philosophical aesthetics, television studies, art theory and film studies. Since ‘there is ‘little open debate in television studies about “how one should study television”, a profusion of different and varied ideas and approaches is regarded as *bonum per se*’ (Cardwell, 2013: 28).

Chapter 3 further delineates the methodological parameters of my approach, particularly its paradigmatic assumptions and consequent epistemological implications. Ascribing to a relativist ontological perspective, I explicate the phenomenological foundations on which my close textual analysis builds, erected on the columns of stylistic analysis, aesthetic appreciation and evaluative criticism. I also present my aesthetic attitude as an outline of my analytic protocol. However, since its linearity occludes the temporal recursion and value-laden selective reflexivity entailed in re-watching the programmes (Hanson, 2008), it should not be construed as prescriptive.

To demonstrate television aesthetics as a practice, this thesis is organised around the three programmes as case studies arranged chronologically by their initial release date. Each chapter follows the route of television aesthetics as laid out in the review of literature. The analysis chapters centre on my subjectivity – the sensations I experience when watching, my immediate impressions, the overwhelming tone, mood and look of the programme as experienced. This entails two kinds of looking; first, a stylistic looking at how the

programmes materially affect and, second, an appreciative looking at the philosophical implications of what is achieved and the questions and themes that arise from each programme.

While each analysis chapter sets out to answer the research questions with respect to the programmes' materiality, it is important to note they have quite different goals and therefore, different strategies. Nevertheless, some thematic similarities are evident. Accordingly, while beauty is a connecting strand running throughout, my thesis will be organised around four distinct but interrelated aesthetic aspects: light (and its extension colour), form (as genre), sensation and the concepts they suggest. This structure orientates the analyses around the programmes' generic expectations, stylistic affectations and philosophical implications. Each chapter builds on the key concepts of the previous ones, showing how the programmes use them differently.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Showtime realist political thriller *Homeland*. The first section considers how the programme's artistic foreshadowing in the main title sequence uses monochromatic imagery to emphasise the importance of luminosity, shadows and greyness and prime viewers' expectations. The next section will discuss the uniqueness of *Homeland*'s form by focusing on the trope of spying as suspicion using fictional user interfaces, its representation of US politics and the crises it alludes to, the casting of a female protagonist and its theme of ambiguous morality.

The third section will focus on the psychical interiority effected by the spatial disorientation of its camera movements and placements as well as its framing shot compositions. It will also show how the antiheroine characterisation of Carrie Mathison is amplified using melodramatic performance, jazz music and the depiction of bipolar disorder.

The final section will reflect on how *Homeland* uses luminosity to raise questions of intelligibility, conflict and contrast as duality.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ABC melodramatic political thriller *Scandal*. In the first section, I show how *Scandal* emphasises contrast through the skeuomorphic instantiation of photographic exposure into its materiality. I will also discuss its cinematographic and narrative use of transparency in reflection, refraction and bevellation, pointing out the importance of the ARRI ALEXA camera. The second section will further explore the trope of spying, the theme of narrative exposure, the historical significance of its casting of a black female protagonist, the political themes it tackles and the moral ambiguity it depicts. I will also discuss *Scandal*'s incorporation of classical liveness through Twitter, embedding the (thriller's) sensory expectation of anticipation and the feeling of community into its structure.

The third section will discuss the antiheroine characterisation of Olivia Pope through a sobering contextualisation of diversity in the film and television industries, Kerry Washington's melodramatic performance and the narrative significance of costuming. I will then focus on how the aurality of the programme (particularly volume, pacing, rhythm, dialogue, jazz music and *The Light* refrain) reconfigures contrast into aesthetic harmony. The final section will demonstrate how the contrasting audiovisual elements as envisioned by showrunner Shonda Rhimes can produce frisson and suggest the compound affect of negative hopefulness and the notion of unconcealment.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Netflix dramatic political thriller *House of Cards*. It commences with a brief but necessary contextualisation of the programme's nearly premature termination and justification of its ultimate inclusion as a case study. The first section then pivots to discuss the precisely calibrated darkness and unconventional lighting

style, complementary colour scheme and picturesque visual tone of the programme as attributable to the close collaboration of creator David Fincher, cinematographer Eigil Bryld (as influenced by artist Vilhelm Hammershoi) and director of photography Igor Martinovic. The second section will discuss how *House of Cards* instantiates spying in a markedly different way from that *Homeland* or *Scandal*, breaks the fourth wall to directly address viewers, and reflects on *House of Cards*' fidelity to its original source material, it being a US television series adaptation of a UK miniseries adaptation of a British novel. I will also consider the influence of Netflix has on the programme in terms of its algorithmic aesthetic, hyperseriality and narrative complexity.

The third section will focus on the chilling characterisation of Claire Underwood as an antiheroine with her inversion of melodramatic performance as controlled *inexpressivity*. I will also discuss the significance of costuming choices, specifically her stiletto heels as a sartorial metaphor for the feeling of female entrapment, concealed interiority, and the sacrifices made to achieve power. I will also note the import of jazz music by lead composer Jeff Beal in infusing *House of Cards* with a noir and operatic sensibility. The last section elaborates on the coldness, strategic calculation and strict construction and geometric framing of scenes in the production of compositional stillness and tension. I will discuss how the general restraint of physical and camera motion frames the hazards and compromises in politics and suggests it often corrupts duality by equivocating the concealing truth with the maintenance of power.

Chapter 7 functions as a meta-evaluative chapter that compares the programmes as instantiations of my quality US political thrillers exemplifying their own aesthetic strategies to convey the darkness, suspense and danger within this genre to affect viewers. The first

section argues that the strange beauty in the programmes is initially established by their distinct and deliberate arrangement of light and colour, of which choice of camera and lenses are indispensable, especially with regards to colour-grading, dynamic range and desaturation. I also highlight that exposure – thematic, conceptual and skeuomorphic – is the key driver of the momentum in the narrative progressions of my case studies. I also argue that the recurrence of contrast, as an instantiation of the concept of duality, appears in a variety of ways. Whether through the foil of characterisations and complementary colour scheme in *House of Cards* or the spying and unconcealment of truth in *Homeland* and *Scandal*, I will demonstrate the epistemological value of uncertainty that frames the programmes.

The second section shows that the US political thriller genre as an aesthetic form hinges on the danger within the US geopolitical institutions and policies (as story arcs), with the protagonist always in danger of ‘losing themselves’ as the series progresses. They also rely on the concept of excess, whether this be through characterisation, darkness or thrills of unexpected actions and revelations. I also assert that the case studies substantially change its television form with its use of female lead protagonists and their depiction of morally ambiguous antiheroines by relating their different character representations to literary antecedents and scholarly formulations of the term. The unexpected continuity of jazz music within all the programmes suggests its consensus as a distinctly American musical genre lends credence to its compatibility with US political thrillers. I also consider the impact of contemporaneous political developments and how these resonate into changing the programme’s narrative trajectory and public discourses.

The third section evaluates the limits of an aesthetic approach. Clearly, it is only one of many ways of viewing television, but one that can compel viewers to reflexively consider

the formal aspects of the programmes they find pleasurable by identifying and interrogating the implicit values embedded within their tastes. I argue that by engaging with a programme's style, sensory expectations and the structural conventions of its genre, it is possible to establish the internal logics and main affective fields of programmes as aesthetic objects in relation to their aspirations. In the closing section, I reach a final judgement by providing answers to the research questions and identifying the theoretical implications of the study with respect to the field of television aesthetics. I conclude by suggesting possible directions and areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2 – TAKING STOCK OF TELEVISION AESTHETICS

Introduction

This is a study about stylistic choices in quality American television from the perspective of aesthetic engagement focused on the political thrillers *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018). It considers debates across a variety of disciplines: television, media and film studies; philosophy; art theory and literary criticism. Specifically, this thesis combines stylistic analysis with aesthetic appreciation, in contrast to conventional approaches in television studies. It further demonstrates an evaluative methodology and a more nuanced reflection on quality American political thrillers' potential for aesthetic enunciation (Cardwell, 2005). Thus, I critically analyse the programmes' particular aesthetic expressions via close textual analysis and discuss the conceptual implications of their specific instantiations.

This thesis results from the conflation of two circumstances: a recognition of several exemplary television programmes (Bignell, 2006) whose style has stood out against the vast televisual landscape (or 'vast wasteland' to use Newton Minow's summation of television broadcasting in his first speech as Federal Communications Commission chairman (1961)) and the realisation that the growing field of television aesthetics could provide a 'cultural forum' (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983: 561) to interrogate the formal stylistics and affective qualities of these beautiful television series. Moreover, there is potential within this field to contribute a new perspective to the 'understanding of what close textual analysis [of television] means' (Cardwell, 2006: 72).

Conventional approaches in television studies which focus on representation or ideology are indeed suitable for assessing ‘television’s import in political, ideological, and socio-cultural terms’ (Cardwell, 2005: 179) and ‘mapping the obvious ways it maintains dominant viewpoints’ (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983: 571). However, they are insufficient for understanding how the pleasurable inhabitation of televisual spaces is premised on television’s affectivity as an aesthetic object. I will employ a philosophical approach that evaluates quality US television political thrillers via principles derived from Kant’s four moments of ‘aesthetic judgment’ (2000: §1-22) and Heideggerian phenomenology, two sources which can proffer a corrective to the foundational texts in television studies that fail to offer avenues for dealing with aesthetics and affects. Though many of Kant’s and Heidegger’s ideas are implicit in the assumptions and subsumed under the methodological implications of contemporary television aestheticians, this thesis aims to make these connections more explicit.

2.1 Reframing Kant’s Four Moments for Television

Television programmes are created and designed to please viewers (amongst other reasons). Yet, their specific intent and corresponding affectivities are only configured when genre, style and creative vision impinge on a viewer in a subjective and indeterminate manner. It is therefore useful to consider Kant’s four moments of aesthetic judgment to outline what is generally expected (and immediately given) and what is beautiful (which may not be so immediately obvious).

The first moment is universality. Kant contends that aesthetic judgments are universal such that they behave *as if* beauty were a real, objective property of the thing judged (§7). In

other words, they involve an expectation or claim of agreement of others ‘without a concept’ (§9). This is comparable to television scholar Jason Mittell’s ‘evaluative claims that are not offered as fact, but supported belief’ (2013: 48). He asserts an intersubjective communicability, in the sense that when judgments of beauty correspond with reflections on observable particularities and are communicated to others they tend towards objectivity (Jacobs, 2001).

Sarah Cardwell too desires that television aesthetics develop a corpus based on the analysis of ‘observable aesthetic qualities...which offer evidential grounds’ (2013: 38) aimed at producing a community of critique in television studies where evaluations, analyses and judgments can be openly discussed and debated. Film and television scholar Jason Jacobs also asserts that universality is an inevitable outcome of aesthetic criticism and that only by ‘articulating why television programmes matter can meaningful criteria be...applied more generally’ (2001: 431). Like Kant, Jacobs sees aesthetic judgments as being based on subjective responses which ‘develop an objective structure when reflected on, that is, when we freely articulate [them] in conversation and in our writing’ (2001: 431).

The notion of freedom is embedded in another, albeit more complex, moment that narrows aesthetic judgments: disinterestedness. For a judgment of beauty to be ‘purely disinterested’ (§2), to be free from any sensible, ethical, political, or intellectual desire, Kant argues one must reflect on the aesthetic properties of objects and that only judgments based on form are ‘without any interest’ (§3), that is, without considering their use for us. He later defines taste as ‘merely contemplative, i.e., a judgment that, indifferent with regards to the existence of an object, merely connects its constitution together with the feeling of pleasure

and displeasure^[MY2] (§5). It is here that strangeness begins to emerge as the dynamic negotiation between experience and pleasure.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu believes that taste is not some inner faculty but ‘based on the opposition between dispositions corresponding to different trajectories, [that] is reinforced and brought to fruition by very different economic conditions’ (1984: 286). Bourdieu further argues that judgments of taste, or the distinctions one makes, are socially conditioned and that a ‘high aesthetic’ (1984: 485) that privileges form and practices the disinterested stance is acquired only through an affluent class habitus, ‘a world freed from urgency’ (1984: 54). In contrast, my understanding of Kant’s disinterestedness is one that sees the competence of the aesthetic judgment as merely dependent on an active decision to concentrate one’s attention on the aesthetic object, one that defers other extraneous matters.

A strength of this aesthetic approach to television is that it focuses on form and how that form affects. Media aesthetician Herbert Zettl’s early ‘factor analysis’ and subsequent work applied aesthetics to television production, not as ‘an abstract concept, but a process’ (Zettl, 1998: 4). He analyses the formal elements of television programmes and relates them to our perceptual responses, though he does not go so far as to conceive of content as a function of how these forms interrelate. Television scholar David Thorburn concurs that basic aesthetic discriminations are necessary to provide a corpus of comparative analyses for identifying changes in historical values and cultural interpretation (1987). However, while he unequivocally rejects the dichotomy of content as discrete from form, he fails to model how such analyses could proceed.

The combination of form and feeling enables the exploration of sensations and reflections in televisual aesthetics. This does not invalidate the essence of Kant’s argument,

but broadens it. Thus, the process of making ‘ideally disinterested’ (Cardwell, 2007: 31) judgments about televisual aesthetics is to assume what Cardwell calls an ‘aesthetic attitude’ (2013: 34). Her process of engaging with television aesthetically entails we first experience, then we see what questions arise; deferring the other kinds of interests (e.g., sociological, historical, cultural or moral) that can subsequently be brought to bear on television works of art.

Since television aesthetics acknowledges that different television works appeal to different television scholars, the field demands that aesthetic criticism apply ‘critical pressure that takes account of [the works’] expressive dimensions’ (Jacobs, 2001: 443). This implies judging the television text on its own merits in a self-contained act of contemplation with no pre-determining concept prejudicing its outcome. It involves a ‘concern for [the stylistic] patterns and conventions’ (Corner, 2003: 94) that shape the text and ‘signal their capacities for transformation and play’ (2003: 95). I argue that since television programmes do not simply exist in a media vacuum, Jacobs’s aesthetic appreciation must be couched within some category of comparison (such as genre or historical period) to assess their degree of difference from other programmes to recognise changes, innovation or distinction. As Cardwell suggests, the evaluative critique can be deferred until after one has experienced the programme’s stylistic elements.

Kant’s third moment of necessity or common sense (although this is not the modern usage of common sense as ‘pragmatic’) brings us closer to the aesthetic experience of television works. It proposes how different experiences and interpretations of style opens a discursive community that can debate our television values and judgments. Just as taste is a mode of contemplation, common sense as Kant sees it, is ‘the well-proportioned disposition

that we require for all cognition and hence also regard as valid for everyone (for every human being) who is determined to judge by means of understanding and sense in combination' (§9). Here Kant is arguing that taste is conditioned by the inherent qualities of our mind, values and senses as our embodied character. In this way, the disagreement between Kant and Bourdieu begins to break down because Kant's account is not predicated on the actual judgment but on the conditions of the judgment.

Kant admits that while the faculties of cognition that permit an aesthetic judgment are in a 'free play' of imagination and understanding and these are subjectively determined by our lived experience, the judgment itself is communicable and it is possible to 'communicate one's state of mind' (§9). Likewise, Bourdieu is clear in his position that taste, and the preferences that result from it, can serve to communicate socioeconomic status. In this way, Kant's aesthetic judgment and Bourdieu's cultural sociology, rendered as taste, are both purposive to the extent that each makes a claim of universal communicability; Bourdieu's to project a sense of superiority and Kant's to experience beauty.

In relation to television aesthetics, media scholar Jason Mittell conceives of judgment as a discursive process of evaluation that 'highlights the contextualized cultural processes of consumption where meaning and value is produced' (Mittell, 2015: 216). He argues that it is possible to use evaluative criticism in a way to 'strengthen our understanding of how a text works' (2015: 207) that is 'up-front' about our preference for television programmes as singular and exemplary works. By explicating who we are as I did at the beginning of chapter 1, this approach examines not only the television works, but also justifies the conditions and values enabling the judgments that we make about them.

Cardwell suggests that this ‘informed approach to the artwork... [be]: non-practical (for its own ends alone), non-cognitive (not to gain knowledge, but simply to savour perception), and non-personal (without self-concern)’ (2013: 34). This assists the viewer in, recognising and understanding the scope of the claims made. As Mittell argues, the purpose of evaluative criticism is ‘to see a series differently, providing a glimpse into one viewer’s aesthetic experience and inviting readers to try on such vicarious reading positions for themselves’ (2015: 207).

To speak of the purpose of televisual aesthetics is to invoke Kant’s final aesthetic moment – purposiveness. For Kant, this purposiveness (without purpose) of the judgment of taste entails the feeling of pleasure. As this beauty relates the television work with feelings of pleasure, ‘this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself’ (2000: §12), such that, although it satisfies cognition, it is not the reason or the cause for it. Furthermore, because Kant’s aesthetic judgment links pleasure with the form of an aesthetic object it also renders the link universally valid since (ideally) all humans possess the capacity for cognitive processes such as making judgments. His claim of the ‘a priori validity of taste’ holds provided the unique relation between the cognitive faculties (of imagination, understanding and judgment) is the feeling of pleasure. Thus, if a judgment of television programmes consists of feelings of pleasure, is ideally disinterested, and contemplates their form as an aesthetic object, then we can express and communicate these feelings as necessary because they are grounded in observable aesthetic qualities that are subjectively experienced as purposive with respect to our embodied tastes.

This thesis is inspired by Kant’s argument in that, seeing television programmes as aesthetic objects, I do not ‘relate the representation by means of understanding to the object

for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure' (§1). This is the core connection to be drawn from this thesis: that the perception of beauty in television is inextricably linked with the sensations specific programmes stimulate and that these can be rigorously interrogated to develop our appreciative capacity and evaluative vocabulary. To demonstrate this approach, I will first explore what the relevant exponents have already discussed.

In the next section, I give an account of how television aesthetics as a field of inquiry came to be emancipated from television studies while simultaneously maintaining a derivative relationship with film studies. Then I will discuss how various scholars have defined the term 'television aesthetics' and survey its key debates. Given the common categorisation of the programmes under scrutiny here, and the oft-cited connection between television aesthetics and contested notions of quality, the next section will grapple with the question of quality. The following section will consider the role of affect and sensation as they relate to aesthetics, before discussing how scholars have applied them to the analysis of film and television. The final section will explore political thrillers as a genre form in terms of its narrative schemata, stylistic conventions and affective expectations.

2.2 Surveying the Field

Electronic television transmission has long become an important cultural artefact since it was invented in 1927 by a 21-year-old inventor Philo Taylor Farnsworth of Beaver, Utah (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1928). Of course, this is a gross simplification as Farnsworth merely encased together Russian Boris Rosing's cathode ray tube and Englishman A.A. Campbell-Swinton's mechanical scanning system – to capture moving images using a beam

of electrons (basically, a primitive camera). The first transmitted image was simply a line (Schwartz, 2009).

Since this initial rudimentary broadcast (if I may call it such), the television apparatus inexorably came to occupy a privileged position within many homes. For researchers keen to understand the development of this new technology, broadcast television represented a paradigm shift for adherents of the Frankfurt School. Scholars such as Theodor W. Adorno, who classify media into the historic, the technical and the capitalist, established a hierarchical discourse of high and popular culture in creative media formats such as print, radio, television and film, being especially critical of the industrial reproduction of art (Laughey, 2007).

Television studies, as means of transposing the discourses of media literacy² to the specificities of television (Spigel and Olsson, 2004), came to prominence in the 20th century with literary and cultural critic Raymond Williams. He famously argues that the defining characteristic of television was not the programmes themselves but ‘the sequence or set of alternative sequences’ as liveness (2003 [1974]: 87) and the ‘planned flow’ between them. While Williams is thinking about the experience of broadcast television as a medium in its specific cultural and technical form in the USA originally, he also suggests that to experience television as an aesthetic medium one should ‘turn off the sound’ (2003: 75) to have

an experience of visual mobility, of contrast of angle, of variation of focus, which is often very beautiful. I see it as one of the primary processes of the technology itself, and one that may come to have increasing importance (2003: 75-76).

² Particularly how the ownership of media institutions concentrated power and restricted the distribution and quality of content (Bagdikian, 2014), the design of legal and regulatory contexts and their corresponding beneficiaries (Potter, 2008) and how medium-specific technological conditions shaped conventions of form and reception models (Bignell, 2004).

In his use of the term beautiful, Williams at least recognises both its significance and yet its concurrent lack of inclusion within conventional discourses of television and cultural studies. His purposeful use of the term here gives it some weight, arguably in the expectation that future scholars following in his stead might pick it up. Yet, it seems that despite the recent ‘affective turn’ heralded by sociologist Patricia Clough ‘to employ new writing/methods for grasping the materialities and temporalities of bodies’ (Clough, 2007: 4) intersecting with modes of technology, ‘an understanding of television as an object of unconscious fantasy and emotional experience remains under-researched’ (Yates, 2014: 1).

Television scholar John Hartley (2009) posits the idea of television as a medium of communication capable of disseminating knowledge and truth about science, education and politics on a global scale rather than medium simply producing entertainment. He also recognises ‘what TV means, how it feels, what it is “for,” changes depending on your own character and taste’ (5), classifying television as a philosophical form of popular media, with applications in the branches of logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics. Hartley, however, refuses to be quartered into admitting that television’s aesthetical appeal extends beyond the features of liveness, transparency and the staging of competition. He ‘does not seek to determine a priori whether TV *is* art’ (161, emphasis author’s own) but defers that assessment to history. Instead, his historiographical ruminations raise the question of what television can be in the future, settling on television’s potential to evolve and innovate into an academic tool.

Film theorist Kristin Thompson contends that an aesthetic engagement with television has long been dismissed by scholars in the more established circles of literary and film theory as ‘an actual threat to cultural standards and to education’ (Thompson, 2003: 4) because such

practices would valorise ‘hierarchical ideas of quality’ (Mills, 2013: 63) and cultural taste (Bourdieu, 1986). However, it is premised on the assumption that aesthetic analyses of television would re-entrench elitist systems of inequality or lower the threshold for rigour because aesthetics does not meet the positivist standards of scientific inquiry. Yet, media scholar Horace Newcomb’s early aesthetic work comes to the defence of television by celebrating ‘the description and definition of the devices that work to make television one of the most popular arts’ (1974: 245). He later argues that a historical ‘examination of the cultural role of entertainment with a close textual analysis of television program content in all its various textual levels and forms’ (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983: 563) is necessary to empirically ground the field of television studies.

By distinguishing television from discourses of ideology, Newcomb peers inside the programmes themselves and champions the merits of immersing oneself in their narrative complexity and ‘the aesthetic structure within’ (Newcomb, 1974: 248). He argues that television can be an aesthetic experience instead of only regarding its practical instrumentality as a device of mass communication and advertising. He also invites an exploration of the subjective and the affective questions that television encourages with its attention to ‘faces, reactions, [and] exploration of emotions’ (Newcomb, 1974: 248) to show how a deep and personal engagement could be affected by a programmes’ stylistic choices. Newcomb later asserts that by focusing only on the content of programmes, we are treating television as merely a technology of communication rather than a work of art. Here, he is implying a television aesthetics approach that combines the appraisal of form and feeling (Newcomb, 2007) requires a reconsideration of television ontology to grapple with notions of beauty.

Television researchers such as I, whose work may not seem obviously connected with that of the aforementioned scholars, have returned to the question of beauty in television. Cardwell posits that we might better understand how such an experience of its formal elements aligns with beauty by a ‘thoughtful, reflective, and respectful consideration of [television] texts’ stylistic qualities’ (Cardwell, 2013: 23). This attention marks a shift from beauty to style, assumes that television is an art form (Cardwell, 2014) and, as such, focuses on its formal elements of composition. For Cardwell and other television aestheticians, style has become a key focus for research into beauty and artistic achievement in television. Throughout this thesis I will use film theorist David Bordwell’s definition of style as a work’s

systematic and significant use of techniques of the medium... *mise en scène* (staging, lighting, performance, and setting); framing, focus, control of color values, and other aspects of cinematography; editing; and sound. Style, is minimally, the texture of the images and sounds, the result of choices made by [the showrunners] in particular historical circumstances (Bordwell, 1998: 4).

Moreover, I synthesise the early work of Williams, the stylistics of Bordwell and Zettl and the philosophy of Cardwell by paying close attention to the relations between the material elements of style in the three programmes, the thrilling sensations they stimulate and the beauty they render, effectively linking style, sensation and beauty. This thesis demonstrates that these disparate scholars have more in common than has been previously considered. Since my aim is to practice ‘a heightened alertness to the formal, sensory, and design qualities of the artwork under scrutiny’ (Cardwell, 2013: 32) that is ‘related in a judgment solely to the subject (its feeling), then they are to that extent always aesthetic’ (Kant, 2000: §1).

According to cultural theorist E. Ann Kaplan, television studies has conventionally been more concerned with ‘the social contexts within which television was viewed and might

be taught' (1993: 186) and the dominant ideologies that facilitated and informed its production than with the actual programmes themselves. Media scholar Charlotte Brunsdon contends this occurred because television studies embarked upon a process of 'institutionalization' marked by 'a general shift away from explicitly evaluative criticism' (1997: 132) since it wanted to locate itself in opposition to the same notions of taste which had previously positioned television as an illegitimate 'low' culture and kept it out of the academy.

While my research uses Kant's taste as 'the general faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation' (2000, §5), television studies' adherence to Bourdieu's idea of taste as 'a marker of class' (1984: 2) has resulted in the 'repudiation of the class and cultural privileges which partially constitute the history of high art (and thus aesthetic discourse)' (Brunsdon, 1997: 136). Yet, as Brunsdon rightly points out, for fruitful debate about issues of quality to occur, the 'variety and diversity' (1997: 139) of judgments of taste must be countenanced. However, she 'privileges the overall provision of quality rather than individual programmes' (1990: 77), an odd position given that programmes are the primary sites for evaluating televisual aesthetics.

As a discrete term, 'television aesthetics' appeared sporadically throughout the latter half of the 20th century. The early work of C.S. Steinberg (1974) asserts that the medium-specific factors of screen size, picturality, and television's social functions are the foundations for judgement. Likewise, Evelina Tarroni (1979) argues the materiality and production techniques used in television are the proper domain of television aesthetics. A first critical, if anthropological, discussion of television aesthetics can be traced back to the American media scholar Herbert Zettl. In *The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics* (1978),

Zettl argues that television was being viewed as merely ‘a distribution device for ready-made messages rather than an art form’ (1978: 3) since much of television was simply commercial entertainment contrived to orientate consumers towards particular products, and so was ‘summarily dismissed’ by serious academics. Furthermore, he agrees with Williams’s view, arguing that the ‘temporal ephemeral experience’ (1978: 3) is the essence of early broadcast television and that which makes it difficult to analyse in the same way as films. Despite these difficulties, Zettl proposes an inductive approach for television’s analysis, that of ‘isolating the existential factors of television’ (1978: 4) rather than explicitly focusing on programmes.

Zettl aligns his perspective with Newcomb’s ‘most popular art’ when he characterises the ‘existential media factors of television’ as the ‘most universal experiential phenomena within our *Zeitgeist*’ (Zettl, 1978: 4, emphasis in original) and directs our attention to the aesthetic values they valorise. His ‘factor analysis’ establishes the fundamental existential factors of television with the concept of ‘aesthetic fields’ defined as the ‘basic image elements (light and shadows, color, two- and three-dimensional space, time and motion, and sound) and how they interrelate and interact with one another’ (1998: 86). Because all television texts use these elements as the building blocks to construct their specific style, attention to them is *a priori* to other modes of analysis, he argues, because ‘even the more sophisticated semiotic, literary, psychological, or social methods of analysis will not help us assess...how the image elements and their specific structures manipulate our perceptions’ (1998: 86).

This approach to television aesthetics is what film and television scholar Christine Geraghty calls ‘a grounded approach to a discussion of aesthetics that offers the possibility for debate’ (2003: 26). But there is a weakness in Zettl’s approach: while admitting the

generalisability of his factor analysis to the formal evaluation of any television programme, his focus on technical production does not elaborate on how these factors contribute to an aesthetic experience in individual television programmes. This is what media sociologist Nick Couldry hints at when he suggests there remains something media scholars have ‘difficulty explaining: the realm of aesthetics’ (2000: 87).

To this end, just as Kant’s aesthetic judgement is comprehended as a series of four moments and Zettl arranges his aesthetic fields in a progression of analyses, similarly Geraghty’s approach involves ‘a number of processes to build up an analytic description that...forms the basis for a discussion about evaluative judgements’ (2003: 32). These entail first, the categorisation of texts inside ‘broad generic distinctions’ to facilitate comparisons and second, textual analyses in which ‘emotion finds expression’ (2003: 33) in relation to the narrative content and drawing on the text’s aesthetic features – audiovisual organisation, framing, dialogue, performance, characterisation, and technical innovation.

When literary critic David Thorburn argues that aesthetic approaches to television which regard the medium as an art form permit philosophical explorations of a programme’s techniques and provide ‘something of the dignity accorded to texts and artefacts’ (1987: 162), he becomes one of the first scholars to seriously analyse televisual aesthetics from an academic perspective. His definition of television as a ‘consensus narrative’ elides with Newcomb’s ‘cultural forum’ and positions it as a ‘cultural formation in which society’s central beliefs and values undergo continuous rehearsal, testing, and revision’ (1987: 161). His literary background is apparent in his view that television contains narrative and dramatic features in thematic density and when he argues that television aesthetics must rely on examples (i.e., individual television programmes) not only to distinguish them in relation to

other programmes and recognise innovation, but also ‘to frame the imaginative space’ (1987: 164) from where the aesthetic ‘field work’ is conducted.

Thorburn’s analysis of discrete programmes has two purposes. The first is historical, to show how the (elements that produce) formulas and conventions vary over time to produce differing effects such as shifts and nuances of genre, tone, mood, style or (re)presentation. The second is philosophical, to question the assumptions and values within and describe how ‘they consciously articulate, examine, and judge such matters themselves’ (1987:196). Here Thorburn suggests that the existence of an aesthetic argument does not invalidate an ideological one. On the contrary, using the textual analysis of television aesthetics to reinforce such accounts, the work of historical and cultural interpretation is considerably strengthened since it is necessarily contingent on these. Media critic John Ellis’s *Visible Fictions* (1992) is as an early exemplar of this. [MY4] Though his initial framing of ‘television’s glance’ in opposition to ‘cinema’s gaze’ is premised on an outdated model of broadcast television, it does illustrate how close attention to televisual aesthetics can lend credence to a comparative analysis of film and television industry practices of the time.

As a student of Zettl, communications scholar Nikos Metallinos comprehensive work on television aesthetics (1997) shares much of the same focus on the compositional elements of the medium. He argues that television should be analysed within the context of philosophy, psychology and neurophysiology as visual literacy. This stems from his belief that the evaluation of television should be grounded not just in a technical understanding of how programmes are produced and transmitted, but also how we physiologically process information. His contextual approach proposes ‘television metacriticism is synonymous with television aesthetics’ (1991: 5) and suggests the semiotic, sociological and linguistic

approaches dominant in television scholarship be supplemented by criticism structured around the axes of perception, cognition and composition. By comprehensively showing how we perceive, interpret and evaluate the compositional rules and production techniques, Metallinos provides a conceptual framework for understanding how the principles of human vision and auditory processing are exploited by television industry practices. His approach provides useful criteria for analysing content and form according to production factors, performance and impact on individuals to assess the artistic value of programmes' visual and auditory elements.

Television aesthetics foregrounds the issues of evaluation and judgment of specific television programmes in recognition of television's potential for artistic expression and achievement. Brunsdon concurs with and refines Thorburn's literary aesthetic approach in arguing for the construction of 'the analytic category of the television text [as an object of study in order to develop] a useful television criticism and television aesthetic' (1997:122). Though the necessity of the category is premised on the notion of judgment, the explication of the criteria used in qualitative television studies is frequently subsumed under claims of audience constitution and investigation and concealed rather than being the express subject of open debate. Brunsdon's entreaty that researchers explicitly interrogate their cultural capital (derived as they^[JB5] are from familiarity with production practices, rigid professional ideologies, or 'class, gender, and national privilege' (1997: 114)), challenges the prevailing approach in academia which saw shifting paradigms, methodologies, and theories across disciplines 'contribute to a radical devaluation of the notion of the text' (1997: 117).

As such, Brunsdon elevates the television text as the site to reify television aesthetics, for it is only through a critical defence of the criteria of what one considers good television

(simultaneously implying what bad television is) that the question of quality can be addressed. While the ‘question of quality’ and how it relates to my own research is explored in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, thus far it emerges as an interrogation of distinction. This thesis recognises the dearth of political thrillers in the growing corpus of analyses in the television aesthetics literature and argues that *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* would make an original contribution. As such, this project is rooted in their affecting sensations and my reflection on these as subjectively experienced.

Television scholar Jason Jacobs’ (2001) work explicitly tackles the issue of judgment, triggering what might be called the modern ‘aesthetic turn’ in television studies as distinct from the earlier work just discussed. He epitomises the backlash in television studies, which attacked the perceived encroachment of American television as a threat to national values in the era of globalisation. Noting that equitable representation (with its emphasis on gender, class and race) became *de rigueur* for television research and established social realism as the canonical marker of quality in the UK, Jacobs argues that television studies’ ‘uncertain relation to “traditional aesthetic criteria” [is] combined with an abhorrence of those criteria and their appropriateness’ (2001: 429). Presaging Newcomb’s later work (2007), he recognises television studies tacit opposition to aesthetics problematises television research precisely because scholarly perspectives have largely been limited to its communicative functions rather than its potential for artistic expression which traditional aesthetic criteria have conventionally been reserved for.

Jacobs argues that making ‘distinctions’ between genre and between texts within genres (akin to Geraghty’s ‘categorization’ and Brunsdon’s ‘generic diversity’) enables evaluative criticism. He proposes that theorising about television’s aesthetic properties and

possibilities follows ‘strong engagement, intense viewer proximity, and concentrated attention’ (Jacobs: 2001:431) with television programmes that invite and can withstand a sustained and critical mode of viewing.³ This way of orientating ourselves allows us to focus on the features that subjectively arouse enjoyment, pleasure or some other form of satisfaction. It is important to understand that this *a priori* point of view is directly derived from Kant and is precisely what scholars are expressing when they judge a television programme as beautiful. This implies there are many different aesthetic perspectives, rather than being just one unique disposition or mode of perception, when we have aesthetic television experiences.

Homeland, Scandal, and House of Cards exhibit an aesthetically dense textuality or what John Caldwell calls their specific ‘televisuality’. Caldwell famously attacks the ‘high theory’ prevalent in television studies for its neglect of the televisual image and forces the quality debate because of what he argues is a shift in television production in the 1980s toward ‘stylistic excess’ (1995: 11). He provides a general syntax of stylistic ‘televisual modes’ (the painterly, the plastic, the transparent, and intermedia) that emphasises the pleasure and aesthetic function of television composition. Because his approach to television aesthetics focuses on the visuality, a weakness is Caldwell’s treatment of the aural aspect of television style, which is almost entirely neglected. However, he does develop televisuality within a discursive analysis of screen theory that evinces the potential and the potency in constructing alternative models of television analysis that are grounded in style.

³ This mode of viewing closely corresponds with the notion of ‘aesthetic attitude’, still a contentious issue in contemporary philosophical aesthetics (Kemp, 1999) with no real consensus (Shusterman and Tomlin, 2010).

Although the corpus of television aesthetics is relatively small, it is expanding by inviting ‘scholarly conceptualisation... [which forges a] new relationship between television and philosophical aesthetics’ (Cardwell, 2013: 40) and new categories of analysis. While its approaches are still developing, its ambit has become a stand-alone area of television studies. Generally, it does not view television as merely a screen upon which various ideologies play out, but rather as a site of expression with each programme stimulating distinct aesthetic reflections. Because this viewpoint draws from different disciplines - film studies, art theory, philosophy, television studies, and literary theory – it is not surprising the voices in television aesthetics ‘do not sing in unison’ (Cardwell, 2006: 72).

An influential contemporary proponent for television aesthetics, Cardwell states that what consensus has developed in the field revolves around its use of stylistic and evaluative terminology (2013). Moreover, she encourages an expanding corpus of explicit television programme evaluations. By emphasising the centrality of rigorous evaluative criticism and stylistic analysis, Cardwell defers discussion of secondary or external dimensions of corresponding social phenomena (i.e., representation or ideology) in lieu of attending to the conceptual and philosophical issues, questions and implications that result from sustained critical attention to television programmes.

Her ‘conceptual’ terminology is carefully distinguished from the ‘theoretical’ precisely because she sees theorisation as emergent from the ‘programmes themselves and [after] our concentrated engagement with them’ (2006: 77). This contrasts with the convention in television studies to proceed with broad theoretical frameworks and then apply them to the texts. What Jacobs calls ‘her central plea’ (Jacobs, 2013: 14) is Cardwell’s whole-hearted proposal to pursue philosophical perspectives that have the potential to resurrect long

dead debates and revisit calcified concepts motivates this project. Accordingly, I will link the analysis chapters with her direction to address the ‘too little real engagement with the substantive content of philosophical aesthetics’ (Cardwell, 2013: 27).

This survey of the relevant exponents in television studies introduces many of the key concepts and terms in television aesthetics. In a sense, it embarks on a fresh approach to television analysis (Cardwell, 2006). Thus, television aesthetics is comprehended as an analytic approach that conjoins the ideas I have just discussed. Deeply indebted to Cardwell, I define television aesthetics⁴ *as an applied philosophical approach to television that uses textual analysis as its primary method to describe, analyse, and appreciate the aesthetic properties of television works of art to 1) discriminate between their stylistic strategies and the features that mark them as subjectively beautiful, and 2) to evaluate their achievements as artistic expressions*. Accordingly, I will explore the exemplary elements in the selected American quality television political thrillers to appreciate what makes them so affective and evaluate them in relation to each other. Given the emphasis on evaluation in the definition above, I will now turn to the debate of quality in television studies.

2.3 A Question of Quality

Though this thesis aims to examine exemplary quality US political thrillers, establishing criteria for quality is problematic because there is no real consensus among television scholars as to what the term means. In its most common meaning, the term ‘quality’ refers to the degree of superiority that an object or body possesses. According to the *Oxford*

⁴ Henceforth, I distinguish ‘television aesthetics’ as the field of study while using ‘televisual aesthetics’ to refer to the actual stylistic elements.

English Dictionary, something ‘has’ quality if it is marked by ‘a concentrated expenditure of involvement, concern, or commitment.’ In television aesthetics, quality is ‘understood as a discursive category used to elevate certain programs over others’ (Mittell, 2015: 208). In this definition, quality is a claim of excellence or exemplarity. While most television scholars would concur with this formulation, they vary in their interpretation of the term, divided between two approaches: generic and discursive (Mittell, 2015), where anti-evaluation manifests as the absence of either. As my approach is a generic-discursive hybrid, it is instructive to consider each in turn.

2.3.1 Discursive Approach

Foucault extensively deploys the discursive approach when he argues that the subject is constituted by the discourse (1972) as a ‘transcendental subject’, though this has the effect of diminishing the subject’s agency. Yet, the discursive orientation is, for Mittell, ‘the only way we make sense of the world’ (2015: 217). He argues that the choice between legitimating discourse and anti-evaluation is a false dichotomy because even though the former may have regressive assumptions at its base, the latter, in its rejection of discourse, simply falls back on cultural norms, effectively reproducing those hierarchies of gender and class to which they are so vehemently opposed. Indeed, Newman and Levine’s (2012) gendered characterisation of television is entirely retrograde, restrictive and even offensive. Mittell recognises that, instead of challenging these norms, the absence of evaluation just leaves them in place, as if by not acknowledging them, they have no effect on one’s work. I position my work as performatively discursive since I will reflexively identify the implicit distinctions embedded within my critical evaluation in chapter 7.

The first truly critical discourse on quality television emerged in *MTM: Quality Television* (1984) in which Feuer et al. describe the ‘quality audience’ as those who ‘enjoy a form of television which is seen as more literate, more stylistically complex, and more psychologically “deep” than ordinary TV fare’ (1984: 56). This conceptualisation of viewers is important because it highlights the three fundamental features that have become the conventional criteria marking quality television and form the premises of many scholars’ discursive formulations of such, although it fails to completely define quality television. Feuer (2007) later revisits the question of quality television and describes it in negative terms as television that defines itself in relation to its perceived distance from network television, across premium (i.e., subscription-based) rather than free broadcast television, as in the slogan ‘It’s not TV. It’s HBO.’ Rather than restricting my analysis to only one type of distribution channel, this thesis uses political thrillers from each of the current television distribution types – broadcast, streaming, and premium – to gauge how their different production practices produce different qualities and determine whether they can be so easily reduced.

Robert Thompson also conceptualises quality television as a negative oppositional relation, asserting that it is ‘best defined by what it is not. It is not regular TV’ (1996: 13). In his analysis of the term, he argues that, by the 1990s, quality television programmes exhibited twelve specific characteristics.⁵ As such, the term quality has ‘become a genre, complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics’ (1996: 16). Though the term ‘formulaic’ implies a

⁵ Thompson describes his ‘complete’ elements of quality television as: not ‘regular’ TV, having producers with a renowned reputation, struggles in the ratings and against ‘profit-mongering networks’, viewed by a ‘blue-chip demographic’ audience, having a large ensemble cast, a memory, exhibits genre hybridity, literary based, self-conscious, controversial, aspires towards realism, and is critically acclaimed. (1996: 13-16).

contradiction of this thesis' focus on exemplarity, I argue that the strange, unique or innovative configuration of these techniques can enhance what viewers are accustomed to normally seeing. Viewers can then appreciate the mixing together of genres and conventions into quasi-hybrids that are frequently controversial, are strikingly self-conscious by referring to events within their own timeline and to television (other programmes as well as the medium itself), and have a large ensemble cast that permits and demands narrative complexity and deliberate memory recall, without necessarily aspiring towards realism.

While Thompson argues that quality television had by the 1990s become associated with ideas of artistic merit and taste and formulaic as a category, this did not really translate into analyses on whether or how such programmes were any good (Brunsdon 1997, Cardwell 2007) and undermined claims of value being insignificant. Nor did it show how these quality elements differentiate a programme from others in the same category. Like Feuer, Thompson limits his analysis to dramatic television, thereby raising the possibility that there are additional criteria of quality for other genres and subgenres such as political satires or, more pertinent to this project, political thrillers. Redemptively, he does begin developing a textual category of evaluation.

Brunsdon's work on quality television pointedly tackles the problem of quality in television studies. She acknowledges the influence of 'subjective factors' of 'personal taste, income, and time' (1990: 74) upon judgement and the ways in which these shape the relationship between generic classification and the function of choice. Like Bourdieu, she argues that judgements of quality are contextual and contingent on an individual's situatedness within a culture. She observes that (at least within British television) defining quality is complicated by various competing strands of discourse – traditional aesthetic

discourse, professional codes and practice, realist paradigms, entertainment and leisure codes, and moral paradigms – that attempt to address the term. Rather than privileging one discourse over another, Brunsdon argues that conceiving of televisual texts from multiple positions permits an ‘aesthetic defence’ (1990: 79) that would otherwise be absent in a comprehensively critical judgment of television.

She later proposes that the assignation of quality in British television (in case studies of the programmes *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada, 1981) and *Jewel in the Crown* (Granada, 1984)) is determined by four ‘quality components’ that establish its aesthetic value. First, that the programme in question has a literary source. Second, the presence of famous theatrical actors within adds a dimension of artistic prestige. Third, the use of high production values and the costs to make them, and the careful selection and arrangement of expensive-looking props, settings, and costumes. The final and most problematic component is the programme’s presentation of a particular image of English society ‘expressed through class and imperialist identity’ (1997: 143). According to Brunsdon, these two programmes epitomise British quality precisely because they ‘incorporate already established taste codes of literature, theatre, interior decoration, interpersonal relationships, and nature [and] produce an image of...Englishness that is untroubled by contemporary division and guarantees aesthetic legitimacy’ (1997: 144). In cautioning that this is distinguished from ‘good’ television that references ‘already existing and validated art forms’ (1997: 113), presents the immediacy of ‘live events,’ or is simply ‘the popular’, Brunsdon argues ‘it is still necessary—and possible—to construct a televisual object of study—and judgment’ (1990b: 125).

As these scholars locate the concept of quality within a broader web of production values and industry practices, the meaning of quality seems to expand and narrow, depending

on their selected grouping and evaluation becomes subsumed in the process of quality-making. However, just because a television programme has the required ‘quality components’ does not necessarily mean that it will be critically successful, achieve cult status or be immensely popular. This also does not preclude the viewer who genuinely enjoys a given programme, regardless of its promoted prestige or popularity.

Rather, what can be learnt from programmes such as *Marvel’s Inhumans* (ABC, 2017) or *Marco Polo* (Netflix, 2018-2019), two extravagantly expensive programmes that were expected to be massive hits and turned out to be phenomenal failures? A television aesthetician strictly adopting a discursive approach might be able to identify which of the programme’s formal features are present but might struggle to explain which they subjectively think are good and why they think so, much less what contributes to its wider value, or explain their failure. Such a practitioner would quickly recognise that ‘quality’ and ‘value’ and ‘good’ remain rather muddled in the discursive approach – sometimes conflated, sometimes separated and often not considered alongside one another – a rather confused way of getting at the programme’s artistic achievements and a viewer’s pleasure.

2.3.2 Generic⁶ Approach

The generic approach is articulated in Cardwell’s (2007) essay on quality television. Approaching the issue in reference to American television, her definition of quality is much more explicit and reflective about the value of the text, taking care to underline and define the assumptions that govern her distinctions. Firstly, she distinguishes between ‘quality’ as

⁶ Since ‘genre’ is both a noun and adjective, henceforth I use the term ‘generic’ as the adjectival form of genre to avoid confusion. It should not be comprehended in the ‘general’ sense meaning of something which is unbranded or has no special properties.

textual signifiers and ‘good’ as value. She argues quality television can be qualified according to its inclusion of specific textual features, whereas good television is discoverable through the ‘exercise of critical judgement,’ that is based on ‘considered, sympathetic, and (ideally) disinterested response to the details of a text’ (2007: 31).

The textual features which constitute quality in American television programmes – high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, careful (or innovative) camerawork and editing, original music, fragmentation in the form of abstraction or defamiliarisation, an intense level of audience engagement characterised by a complex narrative structure, intricate themes, use of specialised language, and fast-paced delivery – she argues may reliably contribute to the pleasure that people obtain from the text and used as criteria to recognise distinction. This pleasure requires interrogation because it is possible to perceive certain quality features as good but not like how it is presented or see a programme that is generically a ‘quality’ programme, but not think it is any good. Crucial here is the ‘subjective experience of an appreciative viewer who feels something towards it’ (2007: 32) and that that affect is fundamentally a *positive* one (Cardwell, 2013: 32, emphasis added).

In turning to the ‘subjective experience,’ Cardwell and Brunsdon are, in fact, returning to the original Greek roots of aesthetics which regarded it as ‘sensitive, perceptive’, ‘that is perceived by the senses or the mind, which Kant sees as ‘the conditions of sensuous perception’. (2000: §13) This *aisthesis* is his central concern since he argues that the ‘subjective condition of all judgements... requires that there be a harmony between faculties’ (2000: §35) and that this occurrence is the definition of aesthetic pleasure. Since this thesis focuses on the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure as a unique configuration of my sensible

and cognitive faculties in harmonious relation with television texts, I argue that it is possible to make aesthetic judgements about *Homeland*, *Scandal*, and *House of Cards* precisely because they are good, that I enjoy – feel pleasure – watching them, and that I can therefore judge them in terms of the aesthetic affectivity of their quality features.

When Cardwell posits ‘to notice a programme’s signifiers of quality is not to assert anything about its value’ (2007:21), she is not simply dismissing ‘quality television’ as a genre. Instead, she positions quality textual signifiers as criteria within different genres, viewer’s subjective values and ‘discourses of judgement’ (Brunsdon, 1990: 67). On this point, I concur that it is necessary to be aware of the signifiers that impart an aesthetic experience while I disagree on the aspect of value. If I recognise the quality signifiers within a television text and it succeeds in drawing my attention to its aesthetic achievements, then it has value *for me*, ‘not only as a cultural artefact, but also as intrinsically, because it is beautiful and wise’ (Thorburn, 1987: 170).

My recourse to the question of quality is by adopting what Mittell calls a ‘process of evaluation’ (2011: 14). that strives to obviate the pitfalls of either the generic or the anti-evaluative perspective by distinguishing between ‘valuation’ and ‘evaluation’. In the former instance, the television text’s value is considered already inherently bound within the text and fixed. In the latter case (derived from Dufrenne’s phenomenological adoption of an aesthetic attitude), it is the *active process* of ‘engaging with aesthetic criteria, textual features, and cultural circulation’ (Mittell, 2015: 220) that transmutes the text into an aesthetic object. This activity is more characteristic of the work in this thesis. While Mittell disagrees with Cardwell, who sees the television text as already imbued with value, at least on one point

they agree: that of developing evaluative criteria *from* texts (or works).⁷

They explore specific works and argue their worth according to how their signifiers align with the work's generic expectations, aesthetic aspirations and their own feelings. In a sense, it is an act of discursive persuasion that is not prescriptive, but which gives credit from their subjective position. In concurrence with Peacock, my aesthetic approach to television does not impose a prescriptive imperative but makes contingent assertions that do not attempt to universalise the value of my case studies' televisual aesthetics. Instead, I illuminate *how* and *why* I 'consider the dynamics, impact, status, and forms' (Peacock, 2007: 5) of *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* to matter.

Thus, US quality television is defined as *a pre-generic classification dependent on the recognition of textual signifiers as criteria enabling viewers to evaluate their aesthetic experience as appreciable in terms of their subjective values and sensory expectations*. Specifically, then, this thesis focuses on the quality textual signifiers of *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* that enhances my televisual experience from the quotidian to the aesthetic. I argue that in 'point[ing] to attributes of the texts, as well as ourselves' (Cardwell, 2013: 36), viewers can learn to appreciate the particularities of their aesthetic pleasure. These process of evaluation not only raise questions about the themes and concepts of the works themselves by evincing television is 'less often concerned with the truth of things than about redrawing the boundaries of what is allowed' (Williford, 2009: 13). It also shows how one's

⁷ Nannicelli (2012) points out the use of 'text' as a synonym for a television programme is problematic due to 'revisionist and expansive' conceptualisations of its ontology in media, literary, linguistic and semiotic scholarship. He proposes instead using more 'critical vocabulary that allows us to speak of television in more precise ways' (170). Since I have already argued in defence of television as a work of art, henceforth I refer to a distinct television programme as a television work (of art) for the remainder of this thesis except when citing.

aesthetic values (e.g., my taste for strangeness, ambiguity and contrast) can focus viewer's attention as principles of perception.

2.4 Aesthetics and Affect

What has hitherto only been implied – the simultaneity of aesthetics as affect and cognition – is made explicit in Kant's *Deduction of Taste* and *On the Faculties of Mind* (2000: §31-39, §46-49). When he writes

the judging of an object for the sake of a *cognition in general* has universal rules, the satisfaction of one can also be announced as a rule for everyone else (§31, emphasis added)

Kant argues that when objects of 'cognition in general' are present, their form stimulates with 'aesthetic attributes' (§49) that are not logical but the 'attribute of a representation of sense'. He notes that the latter always 'go alongside the logical ones, and give the imagination an impetus to think more' yet performs a function distinct from cognition. Kant continues that these 'supplementary presentations' are the 'undeveloped material for the understanding' that the imagination 'associates with that logical representation, and which arouses a multitude of sensations and supplementary representations for which no expression is found'. As such, although the aesthetic experience stems from the object in question, it is linked to its logical attributes by chains of association and become free as a function of time. Here Kant proposes that in the process of attending to the unending 'manifold of partial representations', the imagination is 'boundless' and spreads in a harmonious 'multitude of sublime and calming feelings' 'that only the nature of the subject can produce', which is by definition 'aesthetic pleasure'.

Thus, Kant's focus on the relationship between cognition and affect shows that it is not necessary that the sensations and thoughts that make up the dual nature of the aesthetic experience of the object be universal, that is, the same for every person. But every aesthetic object must necessarily be affective enough to provoke *some* set of associations in every properly situated subject and this subjective difference is actually conceived as a set of values that 'can be communicated to others' via debate and discourse. In this thesis, I synthesise this by self-reflexively seeing my aesthetic experience as 'representations of sense' in relation to 'logical attributes' whilst 'engaging in stylistic criticism as both fruitful in refining our understanding of individual television programmes and in the development of the discipline' (Peacock, 2013: 11).

This is the notion of aesthetics that Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky was envisioning when he moved away from the theory of art as representation towards a notion of art as affect. In his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977 [1910]), he argues that 'form alone...has the power of inner suggestion' (1977: 34) in aesthetic experience and appreciation. Kandinsky further proposes that in any aesthetic analysis, 'theory does not precede practice, but follows her. Everything is, at first, a matter of feeling' (1977: 35).

He uses the term 'spirit' (the same term Kant uses in his *Deduction of Taste*) as a synonym for affect, arguing that it traverses the ineffable boundaries between the aesthetic object and the aesthetic experience. As such, Kandinsky claims the evaluation of art depends upon an attitude of inner necessity, that is, a work of art can be qualified as good, beautiful or sublime if its subjectively desired expectations 'call forth corresponding vibrations' (1977: 53). Though like Kant, his idiosyncratic language sometimes occludes his meaning, Kandinsky's notion of the affective transmission of art situates the aesthetic judgment of

generic expectations within the context of television aesthetics and provides a philosophical justification for perceiving television works as aesthetic objects.

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza similarly ‘considers human actions and appetites in exactly the same manner, as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, and solids’ (2002: 278). His concept of art is also compatible with a project focusing on television aesthetics because, as I have just asserted, aesthetics is itself neither exclusively cognitive nor affective, but both. Much contemporary discourse on affect derives from Spinoza’s *Ethics III: Concerning the Origin and Nature of Emotions* (2002[1677]), where he writes

By emotion [*affectus*] I understand the affections⁸ of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the *ideas* of these affections. Thus, if we can be the adequate cause of one of these affections, then by emotion, I understand activity, otherwise passivity (2002: 278, emphasis my own).

By describing emotions as considered affections of the body, Spinoza dislodges emotions from the realm of responses and situations and ties them firmly to action and encounters. In claiming that the ‘mental decision on the one hand, and the appetite and physical state of the body on the other hand, are simultaneous in nature’ (2002: 281), he buttresses Kant’s assertion that cognition and affect occur simultaneously in the judgment of beauty. More importantly, his proposition that even ‘images of things are the very affections of the human body, that is, the ways in which the human body is affected by external causes and disposed to this or that action’ (2002: 295) implies the duality of being affected and having the capacity to affect exists, and that affect has both a somatic dimension and a mental

⁸ Other translations use the term modification.

dimension. While Spinoza's notion of affect is not the only current account in circulation,⁹ these build on and refine Spinoza's basic ideas, so I will restrict myself to extensions of his usage.

Drawing on Spinoza and the notion of quality valences as the degree of affective intensity, psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1962 and 1991) proposes nine affects broadly categorised according to subjective sensory resonances: positive (enjoyment, interest), neutral (surprise) and negative (anger, disgust, [dissmell](#)¹⁰, distress, fear, shame). His assertion that these basic affects act as motivation is extended by critical theorist Eve Sedgwick's foray into performativity and art (2003) whose theatrical background is evident in her phenomenological linkage of affective absorption with theatricality being negotiated through the body. Most pertinent is Sedgwick's account of shame (co-authored with Adam Frank) as a useful methodological model because the emotion is both an immediately external and historically internal bodily response to strangeness. She ultimately blurs the aesthetic duality of cognition and affect in lieu of 'the middle'.

This is the idea that queer theorist Lauren Berlant picks up in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) as individuals striving to reconcile the incidental coming-into-beingness of their body with their lived experience of the world. She delves deep into variants of hope (such as desire, longing and fantasy), showing that viewers' affective experience with sentimental fiction often substitutes itself for real political action. In arguing that 'all attachment is optimistic

⁹ For alternative refinements of Spinoza's affect, see Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*, Volume 2. Translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, and Bergson, H. (1994) *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books.

¹⁰ Dissmell is a neologism coined by Tomkins, for which he later apologised (Tomkins, 2008). It refers to the characteristic way in which humans react to odours that smell bad.

[...] as the force that moves you out of yourself' (2011: 1), Berlant proposes we seek out novel affective relations as positive transformations of the embodied self.

More pointedly, in her oft-cited introduction to *The Affective Turn* (2007), sociologist Patricia Clough uses affect to explore 'the biomediated body' that affects and is affected. Her focus on 'understanding the field of moving forces' (2007: 15) opens up the circuit of affect into bodies that are 'conceived as infinitely productive' (19). In arguing for the potentially powerful 'affective labor', she claims there is an 'affective economy' in which various types of bodies circulate and where some are valued more than others. Her import here is that she sees in 'the creation of new bodily relationalities with institutions, new possibilities [...] and the potential for change' (25).

In the context of television aesthetics, the implications are even more profound. Since 'the human body can undergo many changes and nevertheless retain impressions or traces of objects and consequently the same images of things' (Spinoza, 2002: 279) as feelings and memory, then engaging with technologies that 'play' with repetition and emotions can function to reconnect me with the social. Subsequently turning my subjective aesthetic experience into an intentional act of reflection that explores strangeness and evaluates the variations of televisual affects enables a critical appreciation of a television work's style. As such, I phenomenologically configure an affective relationship with the work's stylistic elements (embodied as my aesthetic attitude) 'to feel through its tensions and complexities, keeping them in play' (Jacobs and Peacock, 2013: 2).

There is a paucity of literature on the concept of affect within the field of television aesthetics itself. What can be imported comes from film studies, where scholars take one of two positions: the phenomenological affect, as established by Spinoza and his adherents, or

the cognitivist focus on emotion and cognition as espoused by Carroll. Cultural critic Vivien Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts* (2004) focuses her work on concepts of embodiment drawn heavily from the phenomenological work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Hanich, 2017). She argues that the development of visual culture from photographic (via the cinematic) to electronic terrain (being concomitant with the disciplinary evolution of capitalism) has resulted in a contemporary 'disembodied consciousness' of bodies and spaces. Furthermore, she proposes that in the cinematic, one can return to a reflexive 'ethical space' in which the film is 'perceived as the subject of its own vision, as well as an object for our vision' (2004: 148).

Sobchack celebrates the aesthetic experience occasioned by cinema in relation to an affective body that moves beyond its possessive and 'instrumental objectifying' materiality into one with a feeling 'empathetic subjective' materiality. Her work encourages or even demands that we open ourselves up to the 'cinesthetic' (2004: 67)¹¹ capacitive porosity of the senses in their proximity to the affecting onscreen world. As such, though her work suggests rigorous phenomenology as a research methodology for describing and analysing one's engagement with visual media, the analyses of already canonised texts does limit her scope. Her methodology would have benefited from more diverse works. Had she applied her arguments across a wider range of cinematic genres, she might have been better able to develop her ethics of 'specific cultural practices that could—and should—be other than they are' (2004: 182) as a form of politics relying on the authentic emotions of an aesthetic attitude.

¹¹ Sobchack's neologism derives not only from cinema but also from two scientific terms that designate particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium: synaesthesia and coenaesthesia.

The practice of an authentic aesthetic attitude distances itself from the ideological rhetoric and traditional practices of television studies. While potentially disruptive, this positioning is comprehended as a methodological shift towards an unsettled moment of strangeness. This focuses less on what representation is – or might be – and more on what it means or indeed represents: forms, styles, and modes of affect that can enact either an acquiescence or a disjuncture between presentation and the represented with those who mandate and legitimate representation.

Engaging with experimental intercultural cinema, film critic Laura Marks develops an interdisciplinary theory of mimetic representation that ‘can represent nonaudiovisual [sic] sense experiences’ (2000: 2) and explores this possibility. Like Sobchack, Marks demonstrates how phenomenology can describe the ‘multisensory experience’ of film and pays close attention to how ‘the disruptive spaces’ affected by ‘images that are not or cannot be represented’ (2000: 43) traces the history of sense memories to ‘provoke an imaginative reconstruction, such as a flashback, that pulls it back into understandable causal relationships’ (2000: 50) to recover the agency of the viewer in rediscovering the memories embedded in such affects.

However, Marks departs from Sobchack in her model of ‘haptic visuality’ that transforms the distal senses (hearing, seeing) into organs of the proximal senses (smelling, touching, feeling), and that ‘forces the viewer to contemplate the image instead of being pulled into narrative’ (2000: 163). While her argument is premised on the ‘unrepresentable’ in the grainy, overexposed, or unclear textures of low-budget films, I extend Marks’ tactile epistemology to (quality) television programmes by acknowledging that the body has a mimetic relationship to the external world that is, like affect, both cognitive and affective.

Since television is an object in the world, so too does the body have a mimetic relation with it. Her import, while intimate, is surprisingly ethical, entails a ‘look that is so intensively involved with the [image of the] other that it cannot take a step back to discern difference, say, to distinguish figure and ground’ (2002: 19), that it can configure a *harmonious* relationship between television and the body.

What Kant, Spinoza, Sobchack, and Marks have in common is their rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. In *The Body* (2008), cultural theorist Lisa Blackman also concurs, showing how the privileging of rationality in the mind-body dualism paradigm has produced ‘the mind and body as two distinct entities’ (2008: 4). Blackman argues that ‘the corporeal, somatic and material basis of our bodies’ (2008: 126) cannot be reduced by social discourses that construct a ‘molar’ concept of the body as singular and stable, but that ‘we are multiple bodies brought into being and held together through complex practices of self-production’ (2008: 12). This multiplicity of the ‘body-in-process’ echoes Spinoza’s ‘manifolds beings’ (Spinoza, 2000: 283) which are configured as affective enactments dependent on the object encountered.

Blackman’s approach does ‘not start with bodies as a key focus’ (2008: 132) but shows how the body is ‘articulated in the relationships between artefacts, technologies, practices and matter which temporarily form it as a particular kind of object’ (2008: 133). Although due to its overwhelming breadth, her work does not specifically engage with how such practices enact this multiplicity nor how they come to be situated, Blackman’s implication that attention to an embodied ‘concept of subjectivity’ as the ‘individualized self’ offers unique opportunities to explore how embodied subjectivities relate to their situated environment. In this thesis, I discursively construct my viewing self in a manifold ‘televisual

body' performatively enacted in its affective encounters with the televisual aesthetics of political thrillers.

Philosopher Richard Wollheim (1984) notably posits all character engagement falls into two categories: central and acentral identification. Film scholar Murray Smith (1995) notes this ideation of identification is appropriated from psychoanalysis and folk theory, becoming the dominant model of the viewer's emotional relationship with characters as framed by absorption and empathy (in which we feel the same emotions as a character). However, Smith stresses the theoretical description is less important than the experience itself as subjectively experienced.

Still, while he adopts Wollheim's bifurcation, Smith theorises levels of aesthetic engagement with characters as structures of sympathy (in which we feel care for a character). His cognitive-anthropological model proposes the interrelated concepts of recognition (as a kind of character co-construction), alignment, and allegiance are the primary ways viewers relate to onscreen characters through a type of emotional simulation. Smith's alignment closely resembles Gerard Genette's literary concept of 'focalization' (1980) and entails 'spatiotemporal attachment and subjective access' (Smith: 1995: 142) to suggest how viewers perceive characters as they move through the narrative.

Most pertinent to this thesis is Smith's concept of allegiance which 'pertains to the moral evaluation of characters' (2004: 84) by viewers. This is a much more truncated process in films as television seriality protracts the development of a character's motivations, interests, and actions (often over many years), making the plotting of the complete 'graduated moral structure' problematic as character arcs may shift or change dramatically before the series finale. This is especially difficult in the case of antiheroes, where the ambiguity of their

morality is part of the pleasure. Nevertheless, sympathy for characters is essential for a viewer's emotional engagement, at least in the cognitive tradition. Theorists like Plantinga (2009) and Carroll (2010) argue that care and compassion for central characters and the desire for justice (derived from a viewer's own ethical schema) sustains viewers' interests as suspense while also implying how the director feels about the themes presented.

Tarja Laine argues film embodies emotion that in the phenomenological process of emotional attachment within the cinematic event, 'affective ("bodily") and cognitive ("cerebral") states are inextricably intertwined' (2011: 1). She distinguishes between 'affective appraisal' and 'emotional evaluation'; characterising the former as pre-reflective 'situational' sensations and the latter as a 'contextual' account of appraisal that can be remembered and communicated. She also urges scholars interested in studying emotions employ a methodology of openness to a film's emotional core as a kind of quality colouring the work. She uses Bordwell and Thompson's notion of 'saliency' (1985) to focus on those agential techniques that imbue a work with emotion, and which affects viewers.

In distinguishing between the two, Laine does not entirely reject the possibility of Smith's spectator sympathy or Plantinga's 'duty of care' (2009) but asserts that the affective intentionality expressed by a work or its characters is not always identical to the responses of a viewer. This 'emotional dialogue' may be synchronic or nonsynchronic, depending on the viewer's 'sense of self' and their values. Rather than attempting to define the viewer experience in theoretical terms, Laine suggests having an authentic encounter 'requires making sense of *oneself* as a sentient subject' (2011: 7, emphasis author's own) with the emotional valences of the experience as evoked by the interplay of resonant stylistic elements

and tracing the salience as an active participant in the ‘shared existence’ of the experiential event.

While this focus on the affective movements of the self is uncommon in television aesthetics, two scholars in television studies – Mischa Kavka and Kristen Gorton – have recently discussed it. While Kavka uses the ‘realities of feeling’ to explore the ‘performative space and affect of social interaction’ (2008: 25) of television as a ‘technology of intimacy’, she uncritically fails to explicitly define what she means by intimacy. This is odd given her strong theoretical intent. In her analysis of reality television, she argues that individuals do not identify directly with the persons onscreen but instead ‘identify with the affective situation’ (2008: 27). For Kavka, affect is a cusp formation¹² ‘reserved for the productive aspect of the sensing body’ (2008: 30) in its social relation to others. Her arguments revolve around how private televisual relational practices are collectively opened as spaces of ‘public interest’ where affective transmissions produce a mood or tension between the quality of the performance of the self and the more integral value of subjectivity.

Rather than regarding the subjective televisual experience as a private pleasure, Kavka’s claim that all self-performances are rehearsals implies that ‘to be yourself...always presumes an audience’ (2008: 97). Unfortunately, Kavka neither considers alternative possibilities such as viewers’ estrangement from what is onscreen, what Sobchack calls ‘transcendence in immanence’ (Sobchack: 2008: 197), nor does she account for the defamiliarisation of the quotidian (Bordwell and Thompson; 1985). These omissions notwithstanding, this project aims to show how enactments of self-estrangement can also be

¹² Kavka’s conceptual cusp formation serves as point of emergence for the material forms feelings may inhabit and is derived from the ‘bifurcation, doubling, and division’ (2008: 31) that are grounding terms for many accounts of affect.

comprehended as differential selfhoods of the televisual body. That is, all my bodily movements, behaviours, and practices are ‘mobilised by the screen’ (Sobchack, 2004: 103) and performed as looking *strangely* (askew) for the works’ ‘structural instabilities’ and tracing oblique relations in its aesthetic composition.

On the other hand, although Gorton initially frames her work within audience studies, she ends up focusing on television producers’ reliance on heightened emotions when she argues that ‘emotional engagement can be understood as part of the quality of the text’ (2009: 94). However, her attempt to pit theories of affective closeness in television drawn from feminist scholarship against the emotional distancing employed in the tradition of psychoanalytic film theory ultimately succumbs to the limitations imposed on it as an introduction to audience studies. Rather than extending and critically unpacking the theoretically useful concepts of individualism, ‘the personal as political’, or ‘affective contagion’ she initially foregrounds, Gorton abandons her claim to address ‘the ways in which we orientate ourselves in front of the television’ (2009: IX).

Instead, Gorton relies predominantly on research conducted by other audience theorists and fails to offer a model of television affect that is grounded in her own research experience that her use of ‘case studies’ suggests. Redemptively, her (brief) focus on the television ‘industry and its valuation of emotion’ (2009: 144) derived from interviews with industry practitioners does demonstrate that television narratives are structured through ‘characterisation and use of emotion’ (2009: 96) and the importance of ‘working through’ the production practices and material structures to explore the affective process in which ‘the emotional situation the character is in elicits a response while, at the same time, technical devices such as a close-up shot or music [aid](#) and develops this connection’ (2009: 151).

Film and television scholar K.J. Warner's recent work on affect claims 'sonic and visual structures create emotional resonance that then translates to affective pleasure (2019: 231). While her work is premised on a contentious notion of gendered viewers, she does demonstrate how the evocation of affect can stimulate the sublime through the amplification of 'sonic visuality', fantasy and identification. Warner argues that positive sensations associated with character recognition and aspects of representation connect viewers emotionally to the characters and narrative. More 'resonant' connections become reinforced when the sound is paired with imagery in the 'audiovisual' texture of the work in such a way that it generates affective pleasure. This excess is what Laine calls the 'affective glue' (2011: 6) that harmonises viewer identification with desire through subjectively meaningful representation and produces pleasure through the imagination of alternative power dynamics in relation to viewer's lived being-ness. The activation of aesthetic pleasure, thus, is the result of viewers' taste already orientating them towards specific works of art 'to change or modify their moods' (Carroll, 2003: 525).

The notion of 'orientation' that Gorton sets out to work with but never actually extends, she admits come directly from Sarah Ahmed's concept of orientation as the 'different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others' (2006: 3). Ahmed somewhat aligns with Kavka's 'cusp' when she argues that emotions are constructed as the 'disjuncture' in social relations where the context of materiality is forgotten over time but accrues value as affect through reiteration. Additionally, Ahmed posits that this relationality affectively 'create[s] the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated' (2004: 10). This suggests that my feelings in relation to televisual aesthetics are traces of forgotten historical encounters that are reactivated as present affects.

Furthermore, that these affects become embodied emotions implies that the pleasurable relationship itself (between myself and television) is a unique arrangement of affects that altogether are *equivalent* to pleasure. So, to say ‘television is pleasurable’ is to feel its aesthetic elements (the glow of the screen or the hum from speakers, for example) working in, on, and through my being as a televisual body so engaged and ‘at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where [my] body ends and the world begins’ (Ahmed, 2004: 148).¹³ This is similar to the affective analysis the Laura Marks argues begins with a haptic visuality ‘that evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close’ (Marks, 2000: 163) enough to feel through different levels of materiality.

She carefully distinguishes the materiality in the experience of the image and the experience of the screen as a matter of a viewer’s selective attention being both ‘revealing and disclosing’ (Marks; 2016: 263) depending on the screen’s technological specificity (e.g., size, resolution, etc.) and the object of study. I agree ‘a distracted viewer is more likely to respond cognitively and not sensuously’ (261) and note that Marks’ concept of haptic visuality methodologically mirrors my approach to television aesthetics. Her affective analysis of film also begins with a series of responses (which may be experienced simultaneously) that move from the extra-discursive to the highly discursive’ (259). Indeed, my perception of style reflects on those affective and embodied sensations which lead to feelings of beauty then discursively builds on the concepts that organise the programmes’ intentional expressive properties.

¹³ Ahmed argues that it is ‘after all, pain or discomfort that return one’s attention to the surfaces of the body as body’ (2004: 148).

When Kant writes that ‘*only* the human being is capable of an ideal of beauty (2000: §17, emphasis my own), he claims that we can selectively predicate the category of the beautiful through a reflective abstraction of our aesthetic values without necessarily limiting the imaginative possibilities of the beautiful.¹⁴ This reflection introduces the category of the sublime as an aesthetic judgment and it is here that the image of the body lies. When confronted with the televisual body, I am engaging with a multiplicity of beings – the physiological body of the individual actors, the performance of those bodies as intersectional within the fictive universe based on the signification of such representation within the ‘real’ world, the spatial composition of the figures onscreen as a function of time, the body as a narrative trope, my own viewing body – which cannot be appreciated or reflected upon simultaneously though they occur as such. Doing so results in a feeling of excess experienced as awe as I am moved by the polysemic ‘magnitude and might’ (2000: §23) of this manifold aesthetic object.

Derived from Sedgwick, Gorton and Ahmed’s idea of affective contagion is closely aligned with Angel and Gibb’s affect transmission (2006) and Brennan’s emotional ‘catchiness’ (2004). Drawing on Thacker’s concept of ‘biomedia’ as the ‘novel configurations of biologies and technologies’ (Thacker, 2003: 52) and zooming onto the face, Angel and Gibbs claim that when we see ‘the human face in digital and electronic forms of communication [...] we are motivated by amplified televisual affect to participate’ (2006: 26). This participation is an exploitation of the expressive capacity of the face as intimate

¹⁴ Kant appears to be arguing that pleasure in the judgement of beauty consists in the recognition of purposiveness of the object while in the sublime, the pleasure originates in a counter-purposive apprehension that exceeds the object and is initially experienced as uncomfortable and uncanny.

and compelling rather than merely familiar and attenuate. It also forms the root assumption in affective theories of mimesis, identification, sympathy and empathy.

Since this causality is not rational, it represents a re-ordering of attention as an authority. That is, the screen-mediated face so resembles an actual face, that viewers react to them *as if* it were real. Angel and Gibbs observe that when presented with agreeable emotions like smiles, we are relaxed and comfortable. However, ‘extreme negative affect is also extremely punishing’ (2006: 32) and more seriously considered when accompanied by audiovisual signifiers like crying. If the biomediated face can visually express affect, synchronic sonic structures amplify affect and cinematographically framing the face in a close-up shot intensifies the effect, then what aesthetic element of television best embodies excess?

The expression of excess is most immediately achieved in the process of enactment itself, that is, through performance. Of the elements of style, performance takes on a duality as the complementary function of characterisation. When compounded with the modulating aspects of sound, namely volume and tone (I will leave music aside for the time being), performance embodies excess when it is melodramatic. The next section will consider the significance of melodrama as it instantiates excess and contributes to the affective tenor of quality US political thrillers.

2.5 Political Thrillers – A Genre of Excess

Excess as a feature of thrillers has echoes in the notion of the sublime. Kant divides the term between the ‘mathematically and dynamically sublime’ (2000, §24). The mathematical subline indirectly refers to how ‘the very inadequacy of our faculty for

estimating the magnitude of the things of the sensible world awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us' (2000: §25). The dynamically sublime results from direct interaction with 'a power that has no dominion over us' despite its overwhelming magnitude, even if it 'be represented as arousing fear' (2000: §28). Apropos, the thriller genre 'harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its "reception" and its "production"' (Lyotard, 1991: 92). The feeling of the sublime occurs in reflection on the experiences of excess in *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards*.

I argue melodramatic acting and evocative music are expressive 'performance[s] – as [audio]visual spectacle and form of exhibitionism' (Caldwell, 1995: 190) The overabundance of formal stylistic density and calculated production values contribute to political thrillers' sensory profile and consequently, its emotional teleology. Such stylistic excess bypasses cognition, focuses perception and overly stimulates the senses into a strange kind of pleasure resulting from reflexivity. Reflexivity is 'a form of reflection that is connected with the more purely philosophical project of self-knowledge' (Gilmore, n.d.: 7) where researchers can dwell on the aesthetic values, social conditions and the sensory expectations which leads us to programme in the first place.

Of course, the thriller is not the only genre which exploits the heightened arousal and overstimulating sensations of excess. Horror, porn, comedy, soap opera and melodrama are perhaps the most obvious genres which come to mind. Horror (and its more extreme variant, gore) aesthetics aim to instil an anticipatory sense of terror through sudden frights, fear from menacing (and frequently sexist) characterisations and dread through the plotting of an increasingly hopeless narrative, while exhibiting visceral scenes of revulsion and abjection, often achieved using a killer or monster trope that transgresses normative human behaviour

and appearance (Carroll, 1990). Pornography is an extreme case of bodily titillation, limiting a viewer's cognitive faculties (to the preliminary determination of the specific tastes that porn caters to) since sexual arousal is its *raison d'être*. Its primary generic conventions are the depiction of nude bodies, the simulation of intimacy, explicit sexual penetration and extreme fetishism (Williams, 2004) as erotic fantasy.

Comedy narrows the focal point of sensations from all the erogenous zones to one – the mouth, and the production of laughter in the expression of and alignment in senses of humour. Subgenres include (but certainly not limited to) such strains as burlesque, satire, gallows, caricature and parody. These comedic modes ironically deploy incongruity and juxtaposition between characters and situations, using deprecating jokes and diverting attention to its ribald, if supercilious, dialogue (Neale and Krutnik, 2006) as the basis for many of its other (regionally varied) story-telling conventions (i.e., melodramatic exaggeration of plot points beyond the needs of narrative, language and lingering facial close-up shots before commercial breaks, using stereotypes of (gender, ethnicity and religion), making shrewd observations about the strange moments they encounter in everyday life (generally, with specific reference to their cultural values, regional location and peculiar occurrences resulting from their multifaceted identities).

Despite excess and melodrama being represented in other genres, in *Watching Dallas* (1985) Ien Ang conflates melodrama and soap opera in her analysis of viewer reactions to the internationally successful prime-time soap opera *Dallas* (Warner Brothers, 1978 - 1991). In presupposing there is no experience outside of ideology and because the gender breakdown of respondents to the survey that forms the basis of her qualitative study (39 women and 3 men), Ang initially argues the melodramatic imagination of (female) viewers is shaped by an

accretion of repetitive character identification and ‘emotional realism’.¹⁵ In reference to Thomas Elsaesser’s notion of melodrama as a type of pathos that is ‘an aesthetic activity, a sophistication of a more primitive kind of suspense’ (Gledhill, 1986: 47), Gledhill later amends her classification of melodrama as a mode that ‘refers not only to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world’ (1987: 1).

Tania Modleski’s early work on soap opera (1979 and 1982) also confuses the genre, adopting an essentialist and gendered position in her differentiation between film and television melodrama. Her initial feminist ideological imperatives (i.e., the discursive and political disruption of normativity, the lack of narrative closure and a problematic theory of gendered spectatorship) are derived from Roland Barthes’ hermeneutic semiology. Of course, both are correct in theorising that the soap opera genre formulaically melodramatises culturally prescribed ideologies of femininity and domesticity. However, the two terms should not be considered interchangeable, despite there being considerable overlap in their definitions. Refusing to be drawn into parsing soap opera from melodrama, Robert Allen’s work on soap opera (1982) conveniently discusses its visual style using the classic Hollywood realist schema and omits the term melodrama altogether.

Peter Brooks’ early defence of literary melodrama (1976) claims that melodramatic expressions have their own ‘specific logic’. He argues that in its resistance against silence, semiotic and semantic equivocations, melodrama gestures both to a social obfuscation as much as it does to itself. Brooks suggests that melodrama moves beyond the restrictive inadequacy of language in realist narratives to articulate the inarticulate into the realm of the

¹⁵ Such an equivocation is easily problematised by temporality and geography, an issue later taken up by Gledhill and William (2007).

affective and bodily excess of hyperbole. Thus, Brooks' melodramatic mode (which he equates with hysteria) expresses the conflict and the emotional conditions 'correspond[ing] to the struggle toward recognition of the sign of virtue and innocence' (28).

In the real world, melodramatic excess expresses the uneasiness experiencing in navigating the uncertainty in the philosophical terrain of compromise,¹⁶ as the middle ground is evacuated for simplified oppositions in either/or discourses. For example, using the specificity of London's geographic spatiality, Raymond Williams parallels the aesthetics of its miscellaneity [sic], its crowded variety, its randomness of movement' (1973: 154) with the central features of melodrama's hybridity – the serious and the comic, the pantomimic and the spectacular – in expressing 'the felt sense of life' (Williams, 1998: 166) in its ever-shifting experiential relations. Returning to narrative fiction, Laura Mulvey somewhat concurs that character agency and methodological analysis should engage with the genealogical and cultural specificity of melodramatic works as an act of subversion, especially those 'coloured by a female protagonist's dominating point-of-view' (in Gledhill, 2007: 321).

Mercer and Shingler (2004) argue melodrama is a mode of sensationalist narration that endeavours to provoke heightened feelings of pathos (usually) via the lead protagonist, echoing Gledhill's early work. Gledhill's more recent volume *Melodrama Unbound* (2018), edited with Linda Williams, returns to the Greek roots of melodrama as *melos* (for limb (literally), musical phrase, melody, song) and *drâma* (for action of a play). They frame

¹⁶ In this thesis, compromise is comprehended as the metaphysical distance between the US socioculturally conditioned and theological binary belief system of good and bad from the subjectively held values (of ambiguity, excess and contrast, in my case) that govern taste, choice and discourses of intention, care, attention and beauty.

melodrama as a mode of excessive emotional dramaturgy that has traversed time and integrated itself historical and current media formats, art forms and expressive global cultures. To reconcile the tensions between melodrama and realism, they trace how its definition has morphed over time and within global film and television programmes. While Williams (in Gledhill and Williams, 2007) further explores how the seriality of melodrama as an organising structure parallels television's seriality, other contributors consider melodrama's instantiation in performance, set design, aurality and even in costuming. In contrast, Augustin Zarzosa (2013) hypothetically adopts this modal theory before syntactically evacuating it, ultimately settling on melodrama as the pathic 'aesthetic operation' of 'finding pleasure in the private operation of one's own suffering' (2013: 254), for viewers and creatives alike, 'that, in order to alleviate suffering, tests the efficiency of ideas' (2013:237).

Fusing the visual excess of early melodrama as a modal practice producing pathos with soundscapes (as dialogue but especially music)¹⁷ substantiates its incorporation into thrillers' goal of affecting sensations through the body. As such, melodramatic political thrillers intensify the ontological duality of aesthetics, as both cognitive and affective, discussed in the previous section. As a compound noun and subgenre, its attributive 'political' prompts viewers to think both about the work's plot and their prevailing political allegiances and actions while the substantive 'thriller' suggests the excessive in terms of the cognitive considerations of suspicion and stupefaction affected through the somatic movements of thrills, shocks and temporal breaks into melodramatic suspense.

¹⁷ In musicology, melodrama signifies lines spoken to a musical accompaniment (Taag, 2012). Music, like light, can easily bypasses cognition to directly affect the listener.

The political thriller genre, as a compound narrative form then, is ‘essentially fluid’ for its ability to tap into ‘the temper of the times, effortlessly absorbing contemporary political themes and issues’ (Coyne, 2008: 9-10). This fluidity, as Maortua and Echart note, makes it difficult to characterise political thrillers in terms of conventions because 1) scholarly interpretations vary depending on what discipline they hail from, 2) many disparate works are often labelled thrillers and 3) because ‘the common qualities of the thriller are also considered to belong in different genres [...] manifest in examining the endless subtypes’ (2015: 111). Derry suggests ‘thriller’ is ‘an umbrella genre’ (1988: 62) that can accommodate the range of subgenre distinctions, akin to Rubin’s conceptualisation of thriller as a ‘metagenre that gathers several other genres under its umbrella’ (1999: 4).

Again, given my focus on the sensate, I argue that political thrillers’ aim is – rather self-referentially and perhaps so obvious that it is might easily be overlooked – to thrill the viewer using a political storyline within which the protagonist’s central conflict lies. In doing so, political thrillers exploit

states such as suspense, fright, exhilaration, excitement, or speed, so as to create the sensation of ‘being carried away’. This is possible because the protagonist of the thriller is placed in a ‘situation of great crisis’ (Harper, 1974: 3), attempting to regain control and therefore subject to states of fear, anxiety, and even paranoia, as the political thriller well demonstrates in its depiction of characters being followed, chased, or under constant surveillance (Maortua and Echart, 2015: 112).

These affective and emotional states are textually woven into the representation of television characters and narrative (Pribram, 2011). Paying close attention to moments of saliency as a convergence of melodrama with plot points, performance, onscreen spatiotemporal composition and sound attunes my perception of narrative progression as function of knowledgeability. This does not exclude the socially-situated representational

schema that other viewers bring to the work. This pre-structuring of my aesthetic attitude gestures

to the relationship between bodies and space, embedding patterns of tension between the willed direction of the camera and that of the performer in order to immerse the viewer (Donaldson, 2013: 209).

Moreover, since the political thriller's archetypal narrative centres on a 'plot to assassinate a political figure or a revelation of the essential conspiratorial nature of governments and their crimes against their people' (Derry, 1988: 103), the specific representation of characters, actuated through casting and performance, attach themselves to the mechanisms of access that enable pleasure, displeasure or some ambiguous affect in-between. From this definition, we can see the political thriller genre 'involve an *excess* of elements and affects beyond the necessity of narrative [...] so that these elements [...] become an end in themselves' (Rubin, 2013: 5, emphasis author's own).

In the context of contemporary American politics, excess is not merely ruminative confabulation or fictional entertainment. From his bully pulpit as the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump corruptively employs melodrama in crafting a Manichaean sociopolitical narrative, using combative rhetoric and inflammatory sentiment to sow division and discord. He frames the two dominant US political parties as representative of the morally irreconcilable opposition of good (Republican) versus bad (Democrats) despite Trump switching his allegiance five times between 1987 and 2012 (even once to Independent). The 'midground' Independent Party or outliers such as the Reform, Libertarian, Socialist, Natural Law, Constitution, and Green Parties represent a relatively tiny percentage of the population and have little discernible impact outside of regional and local

elections, though they can push the main parties' position on an issue further left or right on the political spectrum.¹⁸

Trump casts whatever political party is in power as having symbolic control for the spirit of the nation in a narrative abetting a collective forgetting of the nation's coloured past. This is as remarkable as it is disingenuous and demonstrates the potentially destructive power of melodrama. In goading his substantial vociferous base with the slogan 'Make America Great Again', Trump gleefully acts as mythic avatar for the atavistic idealisation of American global hegemony. His rhetoric ignores the United States' transparently deleterious effect on our fragile and interdependent ecological ecosystems, perpetuates the inequitable distribution of resources and exclusion of sociocultural plurality, undermines international cooperation and corrupts ideations of truth, agency and democracy.

While this delineation on 'political' at the macrolevel of the medieval 'body politic' or the institutional 'political body' are the most common senses of the genre, insofar as 'political' is comprehended at the microlevel, it is the regarded as the representational politicisation of bodies. Strands of this sense have been picked up, notably by Trump when he transformed the proven efficacy of masks at preventing airborne viral transmission into a sign of party alliance. In fictional television, viewers imaginatively project their operating biographical, educational, cultural but ultimately subjective schemata of experience onto the programme and render the work with a provisional moral code. Characters in the storyworld are also subjected to this moral framework but their melodramatic enactment is at least

¹⁸ Some bipartisanship does exist in the American bicameral political system with respect to foreign policy. However, ideological hierarchies (of race, gender and class) endure and agreement on fundamental issues like climate change, taxation and wealth distribution, health care and civil rights remain elusive due to the belief in the mythic 'America Dream' as the illusory premise for incremental progress (Burgess, 1996) rather than a radical reorganisation of the country's political system.

recognised as a narrative device. The representation of the female protagonists is addressed in the analysis chapters' sections on form and affect where I further discuss their novel casting, melodramatic performances and characterisation as antiheroines.

As a grouping, *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* exhibit similarities that qualify their inclusion as case studies. Narratively speaking, they all broadly involve the machinations and political intrigues that take place within, around and because of the U.S. government. However, as the lead protagonists – Carrie, Olivia and Claire, respectively – are female, these programmes reject the gendered convention in film political thrillers by changing the protagonists from male to female. These protagonists also have a minor story arc in common: they all try to conceal their romantic personal lives from their colleagues, itself suggestive of the powerlessness encountered by women in politics. Moreover, these characters are similar in that they are depicted as relying on their internal gut feelings (in a rapid synthesis of perspective, deduction and evaluation) to direct their external decision-making. Finally, as political thrillers, the programmes employ spying as a narrative trope that is about the giving and withholding of knowledge generally and, as in many contemporary television narratives, specifically inspires a reflection on epistemology. I will explore this generic trope in detail and show how the programmes use them to raise important questions of identity, the search for truth and control.

Conclusion

To reiterate, my aim here is to convey the centrality of sensation and affect. Therefore, this thesis will foreground the form of the political thriller genre as an aesthetic object by first attending to their style. I relate the genre's structural conventions and sensory expectations with exemplarity which I designate as strange beauty to emphasise my aesthetic

attitude of looking at compositional aspects that strike my perception as unusual. My analyses demonstrate the advantages of an aesthetic-oriented approach in television studies by reflecting on the quality textual features Cardwell (2013) identifies and appreciating the ways in which they captivate my attention, engage my senses and sustain rigorous scholarly interrogation. My work enriches the field of television studies and encourages such work within the branch of television aesthetics. However, before I turn to the analysis chapters, it is necessary to provide my axiological assumptions and implications.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Introduction

Insofar as televisual style is affecting, one of its central qualities lies in its capacity to move viewers through the arousal and fulfilment of formal expectations of genre – getting them to *feel through* the evocative power of their resonant associations. My use of (mostly) qualitative methods then, is grounded in the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger,¹⁹ and firmly rooted in the belief that we as human beings frame reality through our experiences. By self-consciously engaging with my own biases and values, I can contribute to a broader and more nuanced understanding of what it means to derive pleasure from television.

Given that my unique background and historical constitution predisposes and, in a way, enables the substantive work in this thesis, it is sensible to clarify the axiological assumptions that influence my research, especially considering its aesthetic core. Positivist (i.e., quantitative) research strives to obviate the values of the researcher to achieve scientific

¹⁹ This is justified because Heidegger's phenomenology is less reliant on the subjectivism found in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Heidegger is a contentious figure. He was a former member of the Nazi Party, and he never publicly disavowed his wartime allegiances or the Holocaust after World War II. For this reason, 'some critics argue that his philosophy is too contaminated by racism to admit rescue' (Leadbeater, 2016: 6). While his history problematises his philosophical credibility, Heidegger's reputation has been somewhat rehabilitated after his black notebooks were posthumously published and revealed a lacklustre adherence to Nazi principles. Moreover, in an interview, Heidegger recalls how in 1934, after a student expressed her incomprehension with his political engagement, 'Heidegger responded, literally, that it was the greatest stupidity of his life' (Petzet, 1983: 37). Furthermore, in at least two letters to his former consort Hannah Arendt, he emphatically decries charges of anti-Semitism as slander. While it is impossible to fully separate the man from his political leanings, his contributions to continental philosophy in the fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics and existentialism are seminal – darkly coloured though they may be.

objectivity (Creswell, 2008). However, from an interpretivist perspective, research is unavoidably value-laden and so I must acknowledge these as derived from my own personal history and the humanistic research conventions and methodological traditions acquired during my academic training (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) and report them so that my selection criteria, investigative context and research values are made explicit (Cardwell, 2007; Brunson, 1997). This reporting is the bedrock ethic of self-disclosure that opens my experience to critical examination to share how the values of my socially situated subjectivity are intimately interconnected not only with the research questions posed, the methods employed and the interpretation of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) but also with the culture in which I reside (Wall, 2008); connections that might have otherwise remained hidden.

3.1 Research Paradigm

This interpretivist position subscribes to a relativistic ontology that sees the nature of reality as collaborative and dependent on the experiential interactions of humans with the external world and accessible only through actively evolving constructs of language and consciousness (Crotty 2003, Clough 2000). It stands opposed to the assumption in the positivist paradigm that reality is entirely objective and that it can be observed and measured without bias using standardised instruments. As a philosophical pluralist, I do not assert that ‘evaluative judgements about television can be neither objective nor evaluable for truth’ (Nannicelli, 2016:125). On the contrary, while selecting *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* for inclusion in this thesis due to their strange beauty is, at first, based on my subjective responses to the works as pleasurable. These are rationally proffered with ‘facts, which are

in principle discoverable, about what the show's creators intended to achieve and whether or not they succeeded' (Nannicelli, 2016: 136).

This project aims to offer an account of my personal excavations from the different 'field sites' in the programmes by interrogating the stylistic elements which activate my aesthetic pleasure. Though this must necessarily be seen through the lens of my embodied experience; the functions, purposes and intentions of the enabling conditions in 'things including medium, genre, mode, style, historical period, and so forth' (Nannicelli, 2016: 137). By evaluating how well these aspects succeed as quality television political thrillers (as the thesis' object of study), I hope to encourage others to interrogate more carefully the criteria of their chosen categories of analysis. This is because the 'reality' that we have the most intimate access to, our own, is not necessarily better than any other person's reality, but rather so that my selection criteria and aesthetic values can be openly debated rather than merely assumed. To this extent, by claiming these programmes have aesthetic merit, 'I am inviting [others] to see the shows how I see them [and] hear how they are speaking to me' (Mittell, 2015: 226) by showing them what I feel to be holding beauty.

To reiterate, my inductive approach to television aesthetics regards television works as art, or minimally, as having the potential to be aesthetic objects and assumes the television work as the site for activating what Cardwell calls 'the aesthetic attitude'. This disposition is a psycho-subjective state where the unity of form and content correspond with perception and feeling to produce a double apprehension, simultaneously experienced disinterestedly as a socially situated physical detachment from the television work and positively as an investment of psychic and emotional energy in the televisual moment (Caldwell 1995, Geraghty 2003, Mittell 2006, Cardwell 2013). It is akin to Kant's modal concept of necessity

in which a unique arrangement in the presentation of an aesthetic object instigates complex feelings of pleasure (Kant, 2000) that enable me to shift my apperception of the television works from the quotidian to the aesthetic by acknowledging both their instrumentality as communicative media and conduits of affect.

Though this thesis is nominally qualitative, it contains references to technical data that is quantitative. However, these terms are misleading because they imply a fixed opposition that is incompatible with an interpretivist account of reality, but the research paradigms are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive. That even the most basic qualitative television research must rely on the mathematical manipulation of numbering, listing, and ordering, whether that be contextual or internal (a conventional study on female representation in political thrillers, for example, must at least rely on a calculus (as the rate of change) over time and statistical content analysis to determine comparative criteria such as screen time, gender distribution and outliers).

This ‘quantitising’ is used ‘to facilitate pattern recognition or otherwise extract meaning from qualitative data, document analytic shifts, and verify interpretations’ (Sandelowski, Voils, and Knafl, 2009: 210) and allows researchers to make claims with the terms ‘some,’ ‘mostly,’ ‘generally’ or ‘typically’. The division between qualitative and quantitative merely ends up ‘delineating and preserving identities and ideologies rather than to describe possibilities and limits of a rather heterogeneous group of data collection and analysis techniques’ (Bergman, 2008: 19). Thus, it is more appropriate to frame my thesis as a type of mixed-methods research that enables me ‘to discern and to show regularities or peculiarities in qualitative data they might not otherwise see...to determine that a pattern or idiosyncrasy they thought was there is not’ (Sandelowski, Voils, and Knafl, 2009: 210).

3.2 Rhetorical Structure

Further to selecting an interpretive quasi-qualitative methodology, I delimit the rhetorical structure of this thesis by indicating the language, the person, and the style of writing. I use Murray Smith's viewer schemata as presuppositions (1995) and Charlotte Brunsdon's 'subjective factors' (1996) to acknowledge how we write reflects the culture and values we bring to the research (Creswell, 2012) but this cannot exclude institutional standards of rigour and accessibility. To maximise intelligibility, I use English with the caveat of analytic terms that have entered the scholarly lexicon in their original language. Otherwise, foreign languages will be indicated with *italics* and followed by a bracketed English language translation. Once introduced, neither italics, quotation marks nor parenthesis are used. Quotation marks retain their referential significance.

Throughout this thesis, I will aim to use the first-person voice 'I' for argumentation and analysis, reserving the third-person voice for references, proper names and citations. This not to reify my subjectivity *per se*, but to assume personal accountability and make the writing performative (Pollock, 2007). It is also political in the sense that its deployment occurs within a contemporaneous atmosphere of change in academia in which multiple forms of knowledge production struggle for legitimacy against the prevailing dominant modes that are increasingly untenable in accounting for the range of different subjectivities and 'other ways of knowing' (Ellis and Bochner, 2010). In terms of tense, I will strive to keep passages in the present tense except in cases where the syntax would render the prose unintelligible (e.g., in-text citations). Finally, the writing hinges on a persuasive style that convinces readers of the plausibility of my perspective. As such, this thesis contains both my opinions and biases, as well as justifications and reasons given as evidence of the aesthetic pleasure of

political thrillers. Accordingly, it is my task to indicate the tools of analysis that I will use throughout this thesis.

3.3 Phenomenological Inquiry

Aesthetician Mikel Dufrenne's influential work *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience) (1953) derives from Kant concept of 'organic unity' (2000, §65), a compromise between sensate perception and cognition (or imagination) in aesthetic experience. In the conscious adoption an aesthetic attitude, the work of art becomes an aesthetic object of perceptual immersion, constituted as an existential duality between the represented and the expressed. It mirrors the transparent ontology of 'the screen' interface which separates the constructed storyworld from my contextual reality. Thus, I engage within the fictional reality through the spatial, temporal and material conditions governing the experience. Representation and expression overlap to create affectively resonant or salient moments in which representation and aesthetic affect are indivisible in a fusion of audiovisuality, symbolic exemplifications and spatiotemporality that establishes the complex, yet singular form that is the television programme.

Yet, if my reality is just a story and only one of infinite others, then how is it that I can construct a coherent account of the phenomenon of affect in relation to political thrillers' aesthetics which forms the core of this thesis that is both cognisable and affective? Hermeneutic phenomenology, which Heidegger saw as a way 'to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself' (Heidegger, 2002: 30), entails both a description of the object of study as it is perceived and a description of the subjectivity of the perceiver in the act of perceiving. As descriptions, both imply a communicable

intersubjectivity, provided a common language exists between subjects. His position departs from his mentor Husserl's phenomenology in that he sees lived experience as inseparable from reality. In arguing that 'ontology is only possible as phenomenology' (Heidegger, 2002: 31), Heidegger is claiming they are one and the same. Thus, to understand televisual affects – to know them – I engage in an investigation of myself through a hermeneutical process of experiencing television aesthetics (Heidegger, 2002: 33).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a method for translating my subjective *Dasein*, or experience of being, not only as it is acted on by televisual affects but also as the researcher investigating the phenomenon of televisual affects on subjectivity. Phenomenology acknowledges the difference between the two but places them in a dialogic continuity as co-constructors of knowledge. Reflexivity in the context of textual analysis is understood as a 'style of research that makes clear the researcher's own [values], beliefs and objectives' (Gilbert, 2008: 512). In relation to the process of meaning-making as the researched, it creates an additional layer of meta-criticism that Cardwell calls 'a reason for the reason' (2013: 40). This double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1984) negotiates the thematic tensions between the interpretive context of the research and the research itself.

Being a study of the self in relation to televisual aesthetics and given my epistemological origination, the aim of using a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology is to be completely transparent and 'explain how [my] Being is to be looked at, how its meaning is to be understood and conceptually grasped' (Heidegger, 2002: 27). It is to remain within the viewing experience itself, creating thought as my interpretation of what is before me, recognising that the meanings of the words *I* use express my historical 'situatedness'. It functions as an ongoing commentary occasioned by the work to *create data as affected*

thought, rather than a description of thinking (which would be an ontic Husserlian mode of analysis), by layering my reflections through repeated experiences with the work. These reflections are conceived as revealing insights, that when questioned, expose my thoughts and invite you to see what is felt and believed to be ‘truth as unconcealment’ (Heidegger, 2002: 263). The purpose of this approach is to clarify the unique conditions of my being, respect my historically and culturally situated ways of knowing, and see the self as a legitimate mode of being, offering insights that, hopefully, encourage a deeper sense of these relations in others.

Thus, the epistemological position that knowledge performatively produced cannot be constructed apart from its associative historical and contextual situations asserts that my historicity and prejudices are an essential and inseparable aspect of this thesis and satisfies the claim that ‘all truth is relative’ (Heidegger, 2002: 208). The implication of this is that the knowledge produced cannot be considered universal and so cannot be discredited according to the positivist criteria of objectivity, validity, and reliability. However, it can still be critiqued and debated, provided it is recognised that the knowledge is perspectival rather than positioned as truth claims.

I adopt what Cardwell calls the ‘aesthetic attitude’, a psycho-subjective state where the unity of form and content corresponding to percept and feeling producing a double apprehension. This is simultaneously experienced as a socially situated physical detachment from the aesthetic object and positively as an immersive investment of psychic and emotional energy in the televisual work (Caldwell, 1995; Geraghty, 2003; Mittell, 2006; Cardwell, 2013) akin to Kant’s modal concept of necessity in which a unique arrangement in the presentation of an art object instigates a ‘disinterested pleasure’ (Kant, 2000). I shift my

apperception of television works from the typical to the aesthetic by acknowledging their instrumentality as mediums of communication *and* as conduits of affect.

This means engaging with research practices and methods that are both exacting analytic tools and capable of rich thematic description. It certainly does not mean entirely rejecting art as purely representative, for surely such an aspect always remains. Rather, it admits its coinciding aesthetic (i.e., affective) function, one which is always there, always ready to create a new history. It is a type of knowledge I performatively enact ‘as precisely a kind of creative writing...[that] will involve attending to the specificity of an artwork, and the specificity of the milieu in which the art object operates’ (O’Sullivan, 2001: 130). Thus, this performative *I* weaves theory and the self, positioning the body as a salient part of the research process to politically ‘emancipate the scholarly voice from the monostylistic confines of academic discourse’ (Spry, 2001: 720).

3.3.1 Befindlichkeit

Heidegger’s translation of German *Befindlichkeit* from the Greek morpheme *διάθεσις* (*diathesis*) is transliterated as disposition. The dispositive notion he develops as a radicalisation of Husserl’s (2001[1900]) bracketing attempts to establish the parameters of investigatory objects and defines the description of experience as entirely subjective. German *Befindlichkeit* positions *Dasein* as ‘being situated.’ Accepting this situatedness ensconces us in a body or being’ (*sein*) and reconfigures it with *da* (here or there, then and because). *Dasein* not only provides an orientation, it also gestures to origin, current location or destination. *Da* is a common phrase in German, and sometimes the translation is *there*, other times it means *here*. But the core idea is *being present*. The situatedness is strictly related to the

body's facticity and it becomes manifest to us through our own moods, feelings and affectivity.

Although one of the most misunderstood terms in Heideggerian phenomenology, *Befindlichkeit* refers to something being both inward and outward, but before a split between inside and outside has been made. Here, the reflexive interactivity between myself and the programmes is experienced as implicitly sensed. For television aesthetics, *Befindlichkeit* is remarkably adept, using a grounded multistep process of articulation, in marking the evaluation of beauty. That is, I proceed by 1) feeling through my situatedness in the worldly research context of viewing television, 2) cognising on my implicit appraisal of the feelings occurring, 3) making these explicit to myself and then 4) performatively communicating it through words as actions.

What makes this philosophical process more appropriate than Husserl's (2012[1913]) ontic view is that *Befindlichkeit* explicates how we come to disclose the ontology of relational objects. Insofar as the 'phenomenon' is the basic unit of the phenomenological method, then *Befindlichkeit* is the method of grounding each assertion in something that then stands out. Thus, 'phenomenology names neither the object of its inquiries, nor does this title characterize the subject-matter of its inquiries. The word informs us only about the how of the presentation and mode of treatment' (Heidegger, 2002: 34).

3.3.2 Radical Reduction...Looks Strange to Me

The central feature of this method is radical reduction. As an advancement and development of Husserl's transcendentalism, radical reduction takes our *Dasein* as an a priori condition and looks for strangeness in the *Befindlichkeit* of the phenomenon, whether that be

in the situation I find myself or in the programmes themselves. What matters is there is an interrogation of our aesthetical sensibilities, moral norms, conventional practices or epistemological knowledge. Radically reducing the assumptions (of space, time, causality, etc.) which frame my consciousness enables me to see the relations in and of themselves. What remains is an account encompassing *Dasein* and speaks of the pathos experienced.

Though Heidegger makes no direct reference to the transcendental subjectivity that results from reduction in *Being and Time*, he does address it in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1988 [1927]) when he writes ‘the phenomenological reduction signifies the leading back of the phenomenological look from the grasp of the being, which is always something definite and determinate, to the understanding of the Being (projecting upon the manner of its unconcealment) of this being’ (29). In television aesthetics, reduction discloses the novel operations that become apparent when we see television programmes as a being. Unfortunately, Heidegger’s methodological explication of this was never completed so we are left to extrapolate it from the similar terminology he uses in other texts. Nonetheless, Heidegger replaces Husserl’s epistemological difference with an ontological reduction that considers reality in terms of subjective perception such that ‘the direction of the way upon which Kant enters, through the regress to the subject, is in the widest sense the only possible and correct one’ (Heidegger, 1998: 103).

3.4 Close Textual Analysis

Fusing textual analysis with phenomenology can achieve a high degree of rigour and analytic precision when it is augmented by methods tailored to the close observation of the formal aesthetic expressions in texts (Besley, 2005). Cardwell suggests that even before the

close analysis of stylistic details of a television programme commences, one must already be deeply and genuinely engaged with it since, as she argues, those that ‘inspire powerful responses’ engender the sustained and determined concentration required ‘to understand why it has affected us thus’ (Cardwell, 2006: 74). Besley (2005) argues that textual analyses are far more insightful if they give accounts of how different people make sense of (television) texts rather than assuming an ‘ideal spectator’. I proceed by first viewing each television work and thereafter developing a carefully tailored analytic approach that combines textual analysis with methodological tools drawn from other disciplines which address the specific issues and sensations the programme raises. However, the issues raised are not necessarily entirely subjective. The concerns about spying, as we shall see in the analysis chapters, are not personal to me. They are there within the programme, should a viewer wish to engage with them.

This goes beyond a mere description or simple synopsis of what is happening onscreen to a careful and repeated observation of the textual features: an observation that isolates what I perceive are strange aesthetic cues and expressions, describes them, and finally posits the ways in which their various affects configure my perception. The analysis chapters highlight each programme’s key stylistic tropes, motifs and affects. I attend carefully to the formal execution or techniques that enable its visual, sonic or otherwise striking stylistic and artistic particularities, and which contribute to its specific aesthetic qualities (e.g., feeling and tone, or ‘strange beauty’). The specific permutation of these elements arises directly from the programmes themselves, so the chapter foci vary (e.g., *Scandal*’s use of colour, skeuomorphic artistic appropriation and frisson, or *Homeland*’s use of melodramatic performance, jazz music and framing). The thesis also considers how the

three programmes disclose compelling continuities, such as stylistic traits (e.g., fracturing), tropes (e.g., a contemporary fascination with spying), conceptual themes (e.g., luminosity and duality), and their use of antiheroine characterisations, which would warrant clearer demarcation of the grouping as a sub-genre.

3.4.1 Stylistic Analysis

My method to stylistic analysis follows from existing practice in television aesthetics. It focuses on the elements of style as defined by Bordwell (on page 32) and then structures them within Zettl's aesthetic fields (of light and shadows, colour, two- and three-dimensional space, time and motion, and sound) to account for lines, shapes, texture, form, value and materiality. Corresponding to a phenomenological perspective and being concerned with sensible plausibility, it has intuitive immersion, close observation and attentiveness, and explicit description in its methodological toolkit. This approach aligns Cardwell's 'aesthetic attitude' (2013: 33) (derived from Kant's mode of disinterested contemplation (2000: §6)) with 'radical reflection' and Heideggerian *Befindlichkeit* (disposedness or the way one finds oneself in pathic relation to the world) (2002 [1927]: §29)), respectively. Thus, this project will contribute to the discussion of how one might engage with these programmes to develop the connection between television aesthetics and analytic aesthetics.

3.4.1.1 Stylometrics

I use three quantitative tools for different purposes, collectively referring to them as stylometrics. The digital colour wheel and chromaticity diagram (as only two types of colour spaces) is helpful for understanding the design choices of light and colour that directors,

cinematographers and colourists constantly contend with. However, I will restrict its formal discussion to Appendix 1 should readers wish for a brief overview as it is not entirely necessary to follow the main arguments of the thesis. David Bordwell's *Cinematics*, as a measure of average shot length in film works proposed by Barry Salt, allows the visualisation of temporal organisation, texture and rhythm, useful for determining a work's editing structure with respect to genre, director and period is demonstrated in the analysis (ASL) of *Scandal*'s exposure. However, the viability of the tool is severely limited in television and was ultimately rejected for reasons of practicality because different directors direct different episodes and the sheer number of episodes in the programmes. Therefore, aside from the ASL 'flash' analysis in chapter 5, it is otherwise restricted to the pilot study in Appendix 2.

Finally, I use concepts derived from the photographic exposure triangle (digitalised as the dynamic stop range of a camera) to reflect on how the elements of contrast and luminosity are technically accomplished. These stylometrics enable me to make subjective analytic claims of aesthetic inference based on objective technical facts and industry practices. That the claims are focused on strangeness or exemplarity recognises that norms and conventions change over time and that it is necessary to see things as they are at a point in time to see what they are not. Moreover, while I do not provide a prototypical television political thriller in the sense that Murray Smith (1995) describes as the normative form to base calculations of change upon, I do regard the archetypical attributes delineated in section 2.5 of the previous chapter as such.

3.4.2 Evaluative Criticism

When aesthetics as a methodological practice tends towards evaluative criticism, it should not be confused with formalism. Rather, Peacock's account suggests a mode of engagement in which the critical viewer experientially mediates a 'final blurring of boundaries' (2010: 108) between the television (as medium and text and art) and the viewer's own experience with the work. This 'attunement or synchronizing of body with technology' (Blackman, 2012: 22) opens unique ways of engaging with and appreciating the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression and a programme's composition. I regard this virtual 'enhancement of life' (Kant, 2000) as an aesthetic experience and practice it as a matter of methodological necessity.

This entails the consideration of a work's moral, political and representational content or meaning in relation to the aesthetician's individual experience. While it may contextualise the work to situate its particularity and distinctness from other works, evaluative criticism is an experiential process that conveys a present perspective that may not be readily apparent or generally admitted. It draws attention to specific aspects of the work that may have been dismissed or overlooked, thus actuating more insightful perception. By integrating close textual analysis, it endeavours to inhabit salient moments of contemplation, bringing to light unseen (or unheard) techniques and unusual connections that refine and reevaluate my interpretation of the work. This structures perception along the expectation of value to effect an appreciation of the distinctive qualities of a work and a more nuanced reflection on how its characteristic features work on formal, affective, representational or historical dimensions. In sum, evaluative criticism recognises that people collaborate in the work to to achieve some

purpose and responds to how well (or not) their creative choices establishes a distinctive style.

3.4.3 Aesthetic Appreciation

Aesthetic appreciation, on the other hand, entails the philosophical reflection on the ideas, concepts, connections and orientations that emerge during the analysis. This extension, according to Nannicelli, is the apprehension of value wherein the determination of creative ‘agency is central’ (2016: 17) to making objective evaluative judgments about subjective observations (2016a). He asserts that being sensitive to the details of a programme (and episodes within) not only permits the work to be individuated from other arts, artworks and artistic practices, but also demands that any account of television aesthetics ‘respect the material conditions’ (2016: 22) of the television production.

Such appreciation acknowledges that there are no evaluative criteria that can be prescribed *a priori* to the engagement with the particularities of the work and its critical context. Indeed, since ‘the extent to which experiential aspects may be understood depends in part on our knowing the medium’s technological capabilities’ (Degge, 1985: 94), aesthetic appreciation implies identifying, and being knowledgeable about, relevant artistic contexts, television conventions and narrative traditions – authorial, generic, stylistic – to reveal aspects of the work that only manifest when perceived with these in mind, and to show ways in which it is different, atypical, and perhaps exemplary. This thesis strives to demonstrate an approach to reflecting on how the work is ordered, to see how its productions practices and composition align with its purposiveness and appreciates what they do well and where they fail to achieve their intended results.

This grounded approach is legislated by aesthetic principles and standards of critical practice and procedure, not by essentialist, theoretical or absolutist criteria. The implication here is that a comparative analysis of programmes enables the cultivation and usage of visual (and aural) evaluative terminology, making incisive (albeit subjective) aesthetic claims justified and substantiated by descriptions of objective depictions and discriminates between the strategies of different works within the same genre. Moreover, aesthetic appreciation also demonstrates the potency of the didactic principles in Zettl's (1998) media literacy schemata and the ethical imperative of Hartley's (2009) educational rationale in relation to television aesthetics, a skill increasingly necessary in the current era of media convergence having been notably accelerated in wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.5 Purposive (Judgment) Sampling Criteria

I use three different political thrillers as case studies, ones that are evidently designed and produced to elicit specific emotional responses (Mittell, 2004) with respect to their distribution channel. I assert that when individual works are contextualised, themes are organised around issues framed as questions, and the research is reflexive (Stakes, 2005), case studies can facilitate the exploration of the genre within the bounded system of quality television to compare their innovations and transformations. Here I provide the guiding principles of my inquiry.

The first criterion for inclusion in the study is that the programmes fell under the category of quality television as described by Cardwell (2007), recalling that her concept of quality refers to the observation of specific textual signifiers commonly used in American television production. This initial purposive sampling strategy is justified because the

presence of these signifiers enables the sustained attention and aesthetic experience necessary to make evaluative judgments and increases the duration of affective responses in relation to them.

The second criterion is that the programmes have a female in the lead role, but also that the character is in a position of high (political or personal) power – that is, I wanted to examine those programmes that were at odds, not only with prevailing expressions of gender inequality (and in television production specifically) but which do not align with my own personal experience of womanhood amongst my friends and family.

For the third criterion of political thrillers, it is important there was a ‘high level of synthesis and cohesion between the stylistic choices and the programmes’ meanings’ (Cardwell, 2007: 30). As a fan of the genre, I expected its repeated viewings ‘raise thoughts and emotions beyond the prosaic or quotidian...shed light upon, reassess, and reshape the significance of the ordinary...providing [me] with the potential for active discovery and reflection’ (Cardwell, 2007: 30).

Finally, I selected programmes that have only been first broadcast from 2012 since this permits an examination of topical themes, recent technical innovations of production, policy changes, shifts in television ecology, and contemporary expressions of quality. I then selected the three works to analyse according to their own aesthetic terms. Since they collectively contain hundreds of hours of core data in addition to their extratextual extensions, I ultimately selected segments of the work that, while highlighting specific stylistic signifiers, exemplify the programmes’ aesthetic.

3.6 Aesthetic Attitude

What follows is an outline of ‘the aesthetic attitude’ I adopt in analysing a discrete episode, beginning with the pilot.²⁰ I chose the pilot as my starting point for two reasons. First, as a way for producers to ‘show off’ and sell the programmes to networks, they intentionally highlight the tone, themes, and style the show will have (Lotz, 2007) and so are a good site to explore the show as an ‘optimistic’ fragment to which other fragments (episodes) will be added to approach the unity of an artwork. Second, the pilot episodes also function as the objects of analysis in a pilot study to test the feasibility of methods, elaborate the actual research protocol, and assess the data analysis techniques to uncover any potential problems (Kezar, 2000).

First, I closely examine the title sequence because this not only nominally identifies the work but ‘expresses a particular affective mode which the producers wish to associate with it’ (Gripsrud, 1995: 184) with its attenuating music and graphics connoting the concepts one can expect the programme to contain. It raises the questions:

- What is the programme about? (genre)
- What is its focus? (themes, concepts)
- What can I expect to see (people, places, things)? (representation)
- How can I characterise the style and what affects does it produce? (aesthetics)

Viewing the episode in its entirety, I keep in mind its subgenre and note the strange discontinuities as critical points to return to later (e.g., as thrillers, were there moments that

²⁰ The pilot episode is the first unit of global expression of intent expressible as a self-contained aesthetic object.

made me laugh?) I repeatedly view the work again, each time noting those moments that give me pause intertextually or shift my awareness to *something* outside the work, paying special attention to the intersecting aesthetic elements that constitute them:

- Sound: what sonic structures are used? How does the non-diegetic soundtrack work to establish pace and tone? Are there prolonged or unusual moments of silence and what is their significance?
- Movement: centripetal, centrifugal, or another model of progression? Is the progression of time coherent throughout or are there gaps? Do the techniques of camera and editing balance the perception of duration or not? How is this comprehended? Are they conventional or unusual and how do they alter perception?
- Space: are special effects or fictional user interfaces (FUI) used? Do they disrupt perception or cohere with other stylistic choices of inhabitation? How does the construction of the *mise en scène* direct attention, feeling, and energy? To what end? How are the elements of perspective arranged and what do they highlight?
- Light and Colour: does the mixture of colour and light establish a distinctive look? Is the dominant palette naturalistic or is it unstable? Where are the sources of light and what do they focus on? What mood do the colour values impart?

I proceed to view episodes again, this time paying attention to how difference is constructed. I also record when the women in the work are doing stereotypical things and when they are doing atypical things. I then review the work an additional time, focusing on the range of visceral affects I experience by asking: When does my feeling coincide with those demonstrated and when do they differ? Does the episode appeal to my cognitive

faculties of memory and reason, or to my intuition and emotions? What is the unique arrangement? Am I satisfied by the engagement or frustrated? Why and to what extent?

The purpose of noting my observations and posing these questions to myself is to create a rich and multi-layered account of the work that builds upon the non-representational as the initial points of meaning that ground the research. Doing so entails reading the aesthetic materiality of the work in terms legible to the manifold of discourses that constitute my particularly embodied subjectivity. It emphasises my position as the instrument of observation and analysis and the reliance on my literary and philosophical academic training and practice.

To further build up the analysis, I will also make use of *mise en scène* schematics of selected scenes that is modelled on Butler's 'telepoetics' (Butler, 2010: 21). Butler's work aims to deconstruct the building blocks of a scene using screengrabs. Similarly, I use screengrabs to demonstrate salient moments of aesthetic exemplification. Along with the historical analysis of their specific industrial contexts and artistic practices, these are used to generate an account of the programmes' visual stylistic choices in terms of editing, camerawork, lighting, and performance which in turn can form the basis of an evaluative comparison of their techniques with respect to quality signifiers and genre conventions. The purpose of this is to analyse how the most affective scenes are emblematic of the work's stylistic schema of sets, lighting, and performance as articulated by the cinematography and editing, and draws attention to how the programme's stylistic choices function in affective interdependence of my discursive evaluation.

3.7 Organisation of Analysis Chapters

In the following analysis chapters, I show how the three programmes exhibit notable stylistic ambitions: each is distinctive, but there are several major thematic commonalities, which organises the chapters as lines of inquiry. In the first instance, the three programmes draw overtly on technically adept, artistic techniques of luminosity to play with our perception. I will focus on light (including extensions of darkness and colour) as a primary aesthetic field, showing how it is necessary building block for the apperception of other aesthetic attributes. Secondly, I reflect on the contours of their form, being especially attentive to genre elements and conventions, which I take to include pre-production conceptualisation and post-production editing and its effect on pacing, rhythm and tone.

Thirdly, I will attend to sensations and affect, showing how characterisation and sound volume, dialogue and music (particularly their use of jazz music) of the three programmes are critical to its affective engagement and enable a more nuanced appreciation of melodramatic performance. Indeed, performance is integral to the transmission of affect, especially if we take the characterisation of style elements as a strange conceptual personification and I will show they work in concert to establish the tenor of the programmes. Finally, I will reflect on and respond to the philosophical and conceptual questions that the programmes raise. Woven throughout these analyses are judgments of beauty, strange though they may be, as I also consider episodic narrative arcs and topical emplotments, narrative tempo as the stretching of suspense, and the epistemological implications of design contrast in the moral grey area between good and bad. By drawing attention to the ways these programmes play with the form of US quality political thrillers, I aim to show how our

appreciation and evaluation of them is enhanced and provide a deeper, richer and more pleasurable experience as we watch.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDING WAYS THROUGH *HOMELAND*

There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion.

- Edgar Allan Poe (1878)

Introduction

Homeland (stylised as HOMELAND) first aired on premium cable network Showtime in October 2011. With the United States still recovering from the 2008 global financial crisis^[JB11], and amidst growing concerns about mass post-911 surveillance and intermittent scandals involving governmental breaches of privacy and institutional whistleblowing, *Homeland* has been described as ‘a straightforward articulation of and a subversive critique of US foreign policy and the national security mind-set’ (Negra and Lagerwey, 2015: 126). Centred around Langley, Virginia at the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, *Homeland* depicts the intersecting axes of central protagonist Carrie Mathison’s (Claire Danes) professional ambition and personal monsters, following her missteps as she attempts to advance her career under the tutelage of her mentor CIA chief Saul Berenson and later NSA advisor to the President (Mandy Patinkin) while struggling to manage her secret bipolar disorder.

The series’ other regular characters include former POW turned Congressman, love interest and future father to Carrie’s daughter Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis)²¹ black-ops

²¹ Danes won the Primetime Emmy Award for Best Actress in 2012 and 2013 for her work on *Homeland*, and has been nominated most years thereafter, while Lewis won Best Actor in 2012.

specialist and CIA White House liaison Dar Adal (F. Murray Abraham) and paramilitary operative Peter Quinn (Rupert Friend). The series begins with Carrie trying to determine Brody's allegiances when he unexpectedly returns to the US having been held as a prisoner of war by al-Qaeda for eight years in Damascus, her gut feeling telling her something is not quite right with his sudden reappearance.

Categorising *Homeland* as a political thriller suggests the programme will evoke sensory states and expectations discussed on pages 66 – 67. Accordingly, the programme begins by using a stark monochromatic colour scheme to echo the contrasting emotions of fear and hope. As constituents of the experience of suspense, the opposing emotions also reverberate with the ontological tensions between fact and fiction (or reality and appearance), highlighting the means to reconcile the two which are played out over the seasons. This fundamental opposition is instantiated repeatedly throughout the series.²²

Long-time friends and frequent collaborators Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon developed *Homeland* as an option after meeting Avi Nir, the chairman of Keshet, an Israeli mass media company in 2010 (O'Connell, 2020). Keen on the idea of a television series about a turned prisoner of war, they spent six months drafting the pilot episode, during which time it morphed into a programme that 'belong[ed] on premium cable...their spec — which was great — had a lot of plot twists. We needed the character turns to be as surprising as the plot' (ibid, par. 27). *Homeland* televisual genealogy can thus be directly traced back to a foreign, politically premised dramatic programme. It is an adaptation (Wells-Lassange, 2017:

²² The efficacy of the suspense and thrilling elements in part derives from the synergy of directors Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa's long history, having previously worked together on the espionage thriller *24* (Fox, 2001-2010) and the science-fiction supernatural thriller *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002).

90) by the original screenwriter Gideon Raff of a fictional Israeli television drama series *Hatufim* (Keshet: 2010) that follows captured Israeli prisoners of war who return home seventeen years later as ‘broken soldiers [with] broken masculinity’ (Hogan, 2012: 5). However, *Homeland* has a greater^{JB12} occurrence and more violent action sequences on a grander^{JB13} scale than *Hatufim* and its melodramatic scenes are enacted through Carrie’s physical exertion, vocal outbursts and facial biomediation.

Perhaps the most noticeable differences between the two programmes are the more visceral scenes of torture and the emphasis on domestic drama that Israeli audiences seem to prefer, being more ‘interested in the relationships, the emotional ride, the secrets and suspense’ (Hogan, 2012: 11). The idea of a psychological puzzle remains; however, while both series initially use narrative complexity to explore the mental damage wrought by war and terrorism, *Homeland* ultimately veers towards more action-oriented scenes, elaborate international set locales and complicated editing sequences, undoubtedly owing to *Homeland*’s significantly larger budget (reported at \$3.75 million per episode for the 2017 season, while *Hatufim* made do with a \$200,000 per episode budget (Hogan, 2012 and Showtime, 2018)).

The first section^{JB14} of this chapter explores how *Homeland* primes viewers in the title sequence (excluding the pilot episode because it was absent) by foreshadowing how the series is structured. This is followed by an exploration of luminosity as it derives from the specific functions of light and darkness within the series. A more nuanced analysis of luminosity follows, explored in relation to spying in *Homeland*, where it takes on a deeper aesthetic significance in contributing to *Homeland*’s form as a political thriller and looks at how the series plays with generic expectations and narrative conventions. The third section builds

upon the affectivity of *Homeland*, paying close attention to characterisation, via Dane's melodramatic performance, the cinematographic framing of interiority and the integration of jazz music. The fourth section reflects on the philosophical concept of duality as an extension of contrast, as it has emerged in the analysis. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to show, not just my state of mind or 'aesthetic attitude' while viewing *Homeland*, but to offer a more materially sophisticated account of its expressive properties which admits the aesthetic associations and generic contexts projected upon and through them.

4.1 Looking With Light Lacking

The aesthetic field of light is *a priori* to our television aesthetics analysis, in the sense that it enables the perception of beauty. This section reflects on how *Homeland* uses light to express the programme's 'classic suspense schema' (Gerrig, 2013: 98) of fear and hope, with varying degrees of darkness to instil uncertainty as the narrative drive to excite viewers. *Homeland* appropriates this somatic tension throughout its textural materiality as a kind of scaffolding, posing the strange conundrum that while focusing more on the spatiality of light, I spend more time engaging with its shades and shadows.

4.1.1 Main Titles Sequence as Series Foreshadowing

Homeland begins with a full black screen. Then the title swiftly appears, letter by letter (though not in the order it is normally spelt) in Coalition font, defining the *sensus communis* of a group of individuals or organisations within a common geographical region sharing nationalist values. White letters spell out MAD, ME AD, HOME AND, and finally HOMELAND on a black background, suggesting its content of madness, a present self with

a reference to atypical depression, domestic home life and the broader country itself as a kind of frontier. The initial colour contrast is simple, clean and sharp, in contrast to the montage of monochromatic grey and grainy images that are to follow. A lingering shot of a slumbering girl appears first, casting a dreamy veil over the programme and gesturing to the normative development of its female protagonist.

In the montage of swift temporal cuts, Carrie matures, from intently watching television and playing the trumpet as a child, into a woman and CIA agent of the American state. This compression of time takes nearly ninety seconds and contains both real and fictive video clips that act as an expositional shorthand for Carrie's background and set up the storyworld of the programme. These shots are edited together as narrative fragments and superimposed upon the image of a darkened maze, framing *Homeland* as a television show about 'individual development caught in the mysterious and incoherent demands of a nation state unsure of itself beyond theatrical gestures' (Jacobs, 2012: 4).²³

The sequence mixes fictional scenes with a variety of video footage from 'the real world'. The footage ranges from former US Presidents George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton to Barack Obama addressing the nation before the state seal and insignia. Though meant to reference Carrie, there are actual photos of Danes as a child leaning on a piano, in addition to images of jazz musician Louis Armstrong performing before an audience, archival videos of America's Middle Eastern war efforts and sundry news broadcasts – interspersed with diegetic scenes of Brody (Damian Lewis) and his wife embracing in their home. Most

²³ From season five on, the main titles sequence changes, incorporating visuals of the Middle East, German language voiceover and video of Berlin and New York City landmarks. This is done to reflect both the change of setting and filming for the year and contemporaneous geopolitical developments. However, the opening still retains some of the most salient scenes from previous seasons.

significantly, there are shots of Carrie clearly exhausted and frazzled but intently spying on a screen, and silhouettes of anonymous suited workers going about their routine business within the interior of governmental agencies' buildings. The sequence culminates in the maze from the sequence of metaphorical images: a young Carrie wearing the mask of a monster and affecting an aggressive stance with her raised hands in a clawing gesture, and Brady and Carrie occupying different positions within the confines of the maze.

Homeland pairs visual contrast and inversions of orientation with a bluesy soundtrack and centres these around the tortuous imagery of the labyrinth. What is at first striking about this allegorical imagery is how it links *Homeland* across the centuries with Greek mythology. While such esoteric influences are often hidden, *Homeland*'s visual allusions make these more explicit. The coupling of the scene in which the younger Carrie is masked with the later ones of the maze evokes the ancient myth of 'The Minotaur in the Labyrinth'. Although most depictions of the Minotaur derive from Ovid's classical description of a cursed 'part man and part bull' (Rustin, 1982) beast, born of an unnatural bestial union and trapped within the deliberately confusing confines beneath the palace of Minos in Crete to mitigate against his appetite for human flesh, several variations exist. Considering the political storyline, the image of the maze presents viewers with a mannerist labyrinth²⁴ (Eco, 2014) having confusing multiple paths and with some dead ends.

Such imagery does several things. First, 'the integration of fictional and factual representations allows [*Homeland*] to take on the connotations of authenticity and cultural validity' (Woods, 2008: 41) in its narrative. Secondly, it presages the stylistic choices of the

²⁴ A labyrinth is an apparently random and convoluted path that is unicursal in nature. A maze is an intricate network of paths which is multicursal and usually designed as a puzzle.

cinematographer and the production crew by framing the programme as a journey through the darkness of the political backdrop; foreshadowing Carrie's ethical compromises to reach her goals and highlights the sense of uncertainty which runs throughout the series. Thirdly, it metaphorically represents the journey into 'the belly of the beast' that Carrie is willing to take in her determined pursuit of what she believes to be America's biggest threat – unknown, or sleeper, terrorists whose private motivations are obscured by a façade of public national respectability. More pointedly, it suggests the threat lies within, and that below the surface of noble civil service; Carrie is constantly wrestling with profoundly frightening issues about morality and her own ambivalent tendencies. Carrie being inside the maze shows that she, according to Chris Billig, executive producer of the main title design (for TCG Studio in Los Angeles), 'would do whatever it takes to win her battles. There's literally nowhere that she's unwilling to go. And that includes enemy territory'. He adds [JB17] that the imagery is meant 'to imply a cat-and-mouse effect, and the labyrinth was perfect for that' (Gould, 2012).

The unnerving and jerky visuals are juxtaposed with a bluesy soundtrack to construct a roadmap of what will be dramatised in the forthcoming season. This becomes clear when one notices how the slight changes edited into the opening of each season – clips of Hillary Clinton when it was supposed that she would win the 2016 presidential election, interspersing character dialogue from episodes with audio snippets from notable political journalists and Gil Scott-Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (1971), the blurry and misprinted double image of the actor's names – purposefully reflect contemporary political developments and the altered state of different characters' consciousnesses as written into the script, as well as formalising the series' aesthetic template, more complexly reflecting Carrie's character growth and changes in circumstances. Made aware of early script

references to Carrie listening to jazz music, lead composer Sean Callery, recalls how in conceptualising the score after he first read the screenplay for *Homeland*, it

really read more like a political thriller than an action series...instead of playing [to] the sort of dark and aggressiveness of the imagery...we would maintain almost a contemplative, mournful kind of sound with the trumpet, and that's how it continued to grow. It's almost like a crying out kind of approach, and it's very effective (Laws, 2015: 2).

The title sequence projects Carrie's fear as a proxy for American sentimentality over the numerous disturbing geopolitical events of the preceding several years and increasing levels of political instability and public uncertainty. However, the interplay of the elements also works to instil a fair amount of hope into the series, with its tonal shifts, moody jazz score and the punctuation of empowering lyrics from Scott-Heron (e.g., 'The revolution will put you in the driver's seat, the first revolution is when you change your mind about how you look at things and see there might be another way to look at them that you have not been shown', etc.). These suggest a (positive) revolution is all but inevitable. Citing Carrie's loneliness as critical to the collaborative composition of the score, Callery notes 'we all feel that way from time to time, that kind of longing, and it's a little painful sometimes, but it's not hopeless' (Laws, 2015: 4). Yet this is a hope that often entails dubious allegiances and equivocal choices. For we do not yet know whether Carrie will lose herself in the end or ultimately find what she is looking for.

4.1.2 Luminosity²⁵

This early use of black and white and the subsequent monochromatism in the main title sequence introduces viewers to the highly structured and deliberate design of *Homeland*. The pilot episode initially establishes a realistic look that balances the excessive affect of a thriller with a plausible visual impression of the world of political espionage. To accomplish this, lighting is of prime importance. Lead cinematographer David Klein (who replaced Nelson Cragg from season three onwards) notes that the process involves first using many light sources, and then adding or subtracting various attachments that shape the light, to ensure that the more important elements are more brightly lit (Creative Cow, 6). He states:

on *Homeland* my version of real, gritty and raw is naturalistic lighting with a little more contrast than you might find in life and slightly less saturation. Why? I have no idea. It just feels right and a lot of times all you have are your instincts. When creating a mood for a specific scene I don't know that I can always tell you why I'm doing what I'm doing except that it feels called for (Ibid, 8).

Klein's use of lighting is not especially new; it has been a mainstay in architectural photography to illuminate interior spaces (Schulz, 2015) without the actual light sources being visible in the shot. His technique allows the lighting to become a critical part of the composition, practically becoming a narrative element in and of itself. He feels on a deeply intuitive level the effects of the lighting without necessarily having the words to articulate why the lighting works. Further to recreating a realistic feel for *Homeland*, Klein sums up his process as effectively 'lighting a room and letting people inhabit it, as opposed to lighting

²⁵ The use of this term is to gesture to 'lumens', the unit of luminous flux in the International System of Units. One lumen is equal to the amount of light given out through a solid angle by a source of one candela intensity radiating equally in all directions. The luminous flux depends on the power of the source and on the colour of the light (Zettl, 2015: 203). As such, luminosity is one of the three attributes of colour perception alongside hue and saturation.

the people' (Creative Cow, 6). Here the emphasis is on making desaturated, naturalistic scenes, creates a paradoxical tension between cinematographic control and creative freedom by carefully over-structuring spatial lighting to fabricate naturalistic realism. This is quite unconventional as lighting typically focuses on the actors' bodies rather than the space itself.

The nature and impact of these creative decisions become apparent when we move deeper into *Homeland* and see how luminosity plays a central role in the affectivity of the series. Luminosity has been variously defined depending on its analytic contexts: from astronomy, where it describes the brightness of objects in space, to photometry, where it is a measure of the total amount of light a source emits. For present purposes, luminosity is comprehended as technically synonymous with lighting effects, such that it represents the perception of a variation in the value or tone of different objects. This has further televisual implications where light is the vehicle for onscreen knowledge as the incident of light is *a priori* to the recognition of visual composition and affective stimulation. This material definition is necessary for reflecting on the significance that light, darkness and the relation between them – contrast – have in making *Homeland* visually pleasurable. It also serves to position *Homeland* as a political thriller that works through the giving and withholding of knowledge. Such lack of knowledge is indispensable to sustaining suspense in the genre generally; the way in which *Homeland* relates narrative darkness to visual darkness accentuates both, using light and shadow to pull viewers into closer proximity by means of its synchronous application to form and feeling.

4.1.3 Chiaroscuro

While not strictly employing the term luminosity, many European Renaissance artists were deeply preoccupied with the relationship between space and light, rigorously developing the techniques of chiaroscuro (and tenebrism)²⁶ to show how lights and darks can imply depth and volume (Costache, 2012). Such practices are successfully exploited in *Homeland's* aesthetic texture. The programme first employs basic chiaroscuro, interspersed with superimpositions and inversions, in the monochromatic main title. The ensuing montage openly plays with our perceptions, prompting us to question what we see or 'know' and priming us for the series' stylistic nuances.

Season two provides a fine example of this careful light planning, echoing the way in which Carrie is lit in the foreground while Brody is placed in the shadows of the maze during the main title sequence. In episode five, 'Q & A,' there is a riveting interrogation scene in which the darkly dramatic lighting draws us deeply into the narrative and subtly shades our perception of Brody. The use of deep, dark background spatially evokes interiority by stripping the space of unnecessary referents. The high contrast in this shot-reverse shot sequence works to conceal Brody's visage and eyes as he prevaricates, obscuring our own perceptual certitude and casting doubt on the veracity of his responses.

²⁶ Chiaroscuro began as a drawing technique that emphasised tonal contrasts in monochromatic compositions. Over the centuries it became transposed into manuscripts, wood-cutting and printmaking (Datta, 2014). Eventually it was developed in painting during the Renaissance period as exemplified by artists such as Rembrandt, da Vinci, and Caravaggio to such an extent that it came to be regarded as one of the four canonical painting modes of Renaissance art amongst Sfumato, Unione and Cangiante (Syson and Keith, 2011). Tenebrism is an extreme, often violent, form of chiaroscuro popularised by Caravaggio that eschews subtle gradations of tone in lieu of rapid transitions from highlight to deep shadow (Landau and Parshall, 1994).



Figure 1 – Carrie interrogates Brody (S2E5)

As the sequence progresses the enveloping darkness is punctuated by pin-points of reflected light. While these are short, intermittent and barely perceptible, they become particularly significant when Carrie attempts to make him see what remains of his essential goodness, her implorations act as a beacon of hope by reminding him he is not a monster and pushing him until he finally breaks and gives genuine information. These flecks of light match and synchronise with the pinpoints in Carrie’s eyes. This does not simply reveal her intention to expose his conflicted interior morality so she can ‘turn him.’ It also emphasises the tense relationship between the characters and ties them together tightly in our minds, offering a glimmer of hope about Brody’s redemption.

In this scene (Figure 1), the occluding darkness is intentionally constructed to convey the caged interiority of Brody’s mind, that is, his character’s trapped sense of interiority. Given *Homeland*’s faux naturalistic lighting style, filling the interrogation room set piece with darkness, or at least making it appear so, serves several functions. In the first instance,

it conceals temporality and evacuates location. Naturalism is rejected in this theatrical staging of background with virtually no clear external references save the light source beyond the mesh of the surrounding cage.



Figure 2 – Carrie stealthily convinces Brody to admit to the attempted Presidential assassination (S2E5)

This darkness is a visual metaphor that sets the stage for a dramatic and intense sequence. Similarly, the coupling of scenic low-key lighting and subtle below-eye-level lighting in the mid-ground pulls us beneath the surface and alters our customary perception of objective outer spatial orientation, leading us instead towards the inner subjective orientation of a tortured and dissembling figure. Trapped within this frame of mind, the shot-reverse-shots reflexively shift focus and illustrate the intense defensive isolation one might feel if a torturous probing is being exacted on the body for information by the very state institutions meant to protect citizens (Figure 2).

The fast falloff²⁷ of the light visible on Brody's spot-lit face emphasises the crinkly texture and shifting shadows of his skin (echoed in the crinkliness of his shirt) as it contorts and furrows in internal struggle. This haptic sensuality conveys the rugged world-weariness of a man who has become disillusioned with the cultural-political milieu, in contrast to Carrie's seemingly composed, slick and self-assured silhouette. Moreover, the single light source (which may also act as the back light) which impertinently draws the viewer's attention is an especially 'effective dramatic agent – an element that operates as an aesthetic intensifier' (Zettl, 2016: 33).²⁸

Its pointed and elevated position within the stark *mise en scène* represents a rather sophisticated approach to illusionism as the composition engages the entire surface of the screen and the space. The light bulb in the background does not just appear to light the scene, it is itself a luminous event that connects to the dramatic unfolding below. Brody cannot access the light reflected in Carrie's eyes due to the psychological detachment born of his protracted imprisonment and torture; he cannot see the light because it is physically behind him and he cannot even get to it because it is outside his holding cell. Carrie, on the other hand can see the light and is trying to get at it and the truth it represents. The light isolates Brody from Carrie, who is soaked in shadow, and they are narratively at odds with one another as they each try to manipulate each other, yet the sense of intimacy is palpable and there is vulnerability and extraordinary tenderness here. Thus, it is quite deliberate that a vector line

²⁷ Falloff is the speed (degree) with which a light screen area transitions into shadowy areas. 'Fast falloff means that the light areas turn abruptly into shadow areas and there is a great difference in brightness between light and shadow areas. Slow falloff indicates a very gradual change from light to dark and a minimal brightness difference between light and shadow areas' (Zettl, 2016: 152).

²⁸ Metallinos calls this 'the lighting the lighting instruments technique,' whereby viewer attention is expressly focused on light producing apparatuses and notes that in US production circles they are labelled as 'practicals' (2013: 244).

drawn from the light source to Carrie creates a halo of light in the strands of her hair. In his mind, Brody is in opposition, seeing Carrie as a personification of what he is not - despite the ostensibly antagonistic circumstances of the interrogation.

Since lighting has a directional function (Zettl, 2016) our eyes are persistently drawn from the light source to Carrie which she reflects onto Brody and then through his eyes back to Carrie. In a sense, Carrie and Brody are narrative embodiments of contrast whereby their alternating distributions – light and dark, smooth and crinkly texture, composed and agitated comportment – balance one another in the sequence and contribute to the spatial delineation of the thematic duality. This is evident in the second figure above where we see their hands link to form an almost ying-yang chain of contrasts. As a result, [JB18] our emotional engagement with the theme is heightened in witnessing the clasping of their hands – we simultaneously hope that Carrie can convince Brody to ‘come around’, to complete the circle as it were, while fearing that he will not. This oscillating counterbalance may also signify the ambiguous morals (or nihilism) they both share, and which ebb and flow depending on the circumstances.

Homeland's use of chiaroscuro in narratively salient scenes (e.g., confrontation, surveillance, action) is intended to maximise their drama and mystery by featuring an excess of shadow, striking contrasts and emphasising intense character emotionality. Given the cinematic binary convention of attributing white (or light) with goodness and black (darkness) with evil (Brinckmann, 2014), repeatedly bathing scenes in greys and shadows suggests the midpoint between the two as uncertainty and fragmentation of character. Since the lighting is sharp (well defined shadows), its quality can be defined as hard since it does not use the overly diffused and shadowless lighting of sitcoms and multi-camera shows.

This hard light makes its characters seem hardened and in tension with their external environment creating a mood of alienation, confusion and introversion. This is predominantly down to the positioning of the key light: using a hard key setup (3:00 position with no fill light and the backlight at the 11:00 position) with reverse-shot camera placement darkens the mood because we can only partially make out the character's forward facing features and barely discern the silhouette of the backward facing character. On an unconscious somatic level, the lack of visual information, particularly about the face and especially the eyes, makes for uncomfortable, anxious and suspicious affects (Angel and Gibbs, 2006).

Since so many scenes are hardly lit, the perception of space (and the figures occupying it) is occluded and the planes of depth are compressed, so viewers must turn to camera placement, dialogue and music to orientate themselves through the darkness. In our darkened scene, because the switching between cameras in the reverse shot setup with Carrie and Brody is just below eye level, we can view the scene from a subjective camera angle.²⁹ The high contrast renders the figures virtually the only referents with which to ground our vision, so we coordinate them with the light, using the cage and the table as perspective lines to inhabit and feel through the depth of field. This imaginative labour is necessarily increased when luminosity is at its lowest register.³⁰

²⁹ This near eye-line match assumes the actual viewing position and location of the viewer; see more in the limits section of chapter six. Briefly, subjective camera angles are shot from the perspective of a single character; POV shots are directly subjective. In objective camera angles, we view the scene from the perspective of an unseen observer.

³⁰ Moreover, our proximity to Carrie and Brody is determined by their relative onscreen proportion. Because Carrie's shot scale is somewhat larger, our identification with her is strongest – she is the lead star after all!

While the notion that ‘narrative sequences [can] become venues for the transmission of luminous events’ (Panagia, 2015: 37) is clearly an aesthetic consideration in *Homeland*, luminosity also has a thematic function. When luminosity is at a minimum within the narrative, that is, when fear reigns, the characters too increase their labour to questionable effect. When [the CIA operatives] (being an organ of US federal government apparatus), as personified by Carrie, becomes increasingly paranoid about their security on the geopolitical stage, we may rightly claim they too imagine themselves to be ‘in the dark’. That *Homeland* derives its name from the cabinet ‘Department of Homeland Security’ positions the programme as portraying the ‘violent and intrusive governing and corporate powers as a moral imperative for the practice of sovereign freedom...and the securitization of American life’ (Negra and Lagerwey, 2015: 131). The constant surveillance of presumed terrorists and its problematic justification of suspending civil liberties when applied domestically to the so-called ‘home-grown’ variety can be viewed as ‘shining the light’ on the subject.

4.2 Political Thrillers: Luminosity in Action

To reiterate, a duality at the core of *Homeland* in terms of value between darkness and light is instantiated via luminosity. To dramatise this, *Homeland* frequently uses the chiaroscuro technique of contrast to correlate the two opposing and generic sensory expectations of suspense - fear and hope – with story uncertainty and plot knowledgeability to propel narrative momentum. Positioning light as an *a priori* aesthetic field necessitates the further exploration of *Homeland’s* form as a political thriller and enables its spying leitmotif to be examined through its luminous qualities.

4.2.1 Spying as Suspicion: Framing with Fictional User Interfaces

Spying has long been a common trope in fictional literary, film and television political thrillers (Moran and Johnson, 2010), appearing in earlier suspense genres such as spy, mystery and detective which Eva Horn painstakingly documents in *The Secret War* (2013). She argues its prevalence in fictional media increased dramatically during the 20th century, reaching its apex during the arms race *realpolitik* of the Cold War. The potential for global mutually assured nuclear destruction effected paranoid themes of treason, secrecy, suspicion and surveillance and the successful proliferation of mass media popular fiction formats intertwined with hypocritical ideologies of political nationalism and the anxieties that ossified labyrinthian inequitable national bureaucracies, ineffectual international security policies and conflicting geopolitical economic interests (Miller, 2003), codifying espionage as a necessary, if technically illegal, utilitarian enterprise.

The three programmes that comprise the examples analysed in this thesis - *Scandal*, *House of Cards* and *Homeland* - employ spying in narrative and thematic motifs that imagine some potential institutional consequences of the core neoliberal American values of individualism, profit and exceptionalism systematised into fractured, manipulated and unaccountable governance models of incompetent showmanship, endemic corruption, organisational opacity, deliberate deception and plausible deniability. In *Homeland*, spy scenes transform the ‘negative’ immorality formerly associated with spying (as an inviolable invasion of privacy) into a necessary and patriotic political activity justified as a moral imperative for the continued practice of sovereign freedom and the securitisation of American life.

In older fictional political thriller formats such as Rudyard Kipling's colonial novel *Kim* (1901) or John Frankenheimer's film *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), spying is presented as following, pursuing or observing a target secretly with relatively low-tech means of obtaining useful information. With the computational technology of the 21st century in *Homeland*, it also involves the installation of various types of cameras and sophisticated surveillance equipment to spy on targets and analyse their observations from a safe and discreet distance on one or more screens. Consequently, when viewing *Homeland* 'we spend a significant amount of time looking at the screens of computers and other devices, and hearing the sounds they make' (Deane, 2013: 309).

Homeland posits the idea that the contemporary obsession with spying is the new reality mediated through different frames of reference. The function of these fictional user interfaces (FUIs) is ostensibly to convey to viewers that the characters are surreptitiously scrutinising an environment they would not normally have access to. FUIs also exploit 'the pleasure afforded by a computational aesthetic' (Deane, 2013: 310) that appeals to current screen-embodied cultural sensibilities, warranting social media companies to search for otherwise unavailable information overriding concerns that their spying interfaces are marketed under the guise of 'global connectivity' (Wharton, 2019) but actually monitor their users' daily actions and interests, invisibly integrating the algorithmic collation, fragmentation, and selling of personal data by the very companies providing the services to users.

Spying FUIs 'enable us to see that the very activity that embedded screens purportedly enable – seeing the imperceptible – [...and they_{JB20}] distract the viewer from the thing they cannot do by seeming to achieve it' (Dean, 2013: 317). Thus, spying in *Homeland*



Figure 3 – Carrie spies on the President’s Chief of Staff Wellington (and illustrative of FUI) (S7E3)

also blurs the distinction between the story and the real world by appropriating popular, political and affective sentiment to give its actions narrative plausibility and an experiential epistemological substantiality. The vetting of this data as genuine also suggests spying is necessary to access the [hidden recesses of psychic interiority](#) and intentionality^[JB21].³¹

Paradoxically, seeing luminosity in action is better afforded by interpreting the differences in the areas of darkness in spying sequences. As shown in Figure 3, these scenes are composed as a conflation of two narrative events, (1) the action within the FUI and (2) the action of the spy, constructing a two-dimensional framing structure. These two events capture the monochrome within the FUI and the surrounding light without. The second event symbolises hope in the potential of exposure. [It](#)^[JB22] also depicts fear in the tense figure of the spy

³¹ Although this thesis isolates the different aesthetic elements, they generally occur all together. While it would be ideal to analyse them simultaneously, integrating all the elements of style from a programme would be far too unwieldy for a thesis of this size.

as they intrude into the private sphere of individuals under the legitimating cover of ‘intelligence.’

Such scenes can be aesthetically experienced by seeing the thematic ambiguity paralleled in the formal aspects of their respective vector fields. The two events are clearly delineated and their respective mise en scènes are markedly different. In the first frame, the granular plane of the FUI screen separates the unsuspecting subjects moving from askance/oblique angles in full to long shots, in contrast to the rigid and hunched, almost symmetrically centred and fixed figure of (usually) Carrie in medium to close-up shots in the second frame (of the screen). Moreover, these shot variants allow viewers to see the lines of intensity etched into Carrie’s expressions in contrast to the vague visages in the first frame.

In the lower frame, the grainy transitions are not very dark and the shaded parts are vaguely visible in blue undertones. The rendering of light is markedly different in the screen frame; here the staging is dominated by strong tonal contrasts and abrupt transitions from light to dark. The darkness and deep shadows make it difficult to discriminate the forms which blend into a black background while the corresponding lack of clarity alludes to the [JB23] shady activity being concealed. Since the contrast in lighting has an expressive function (Zettl, 2016: 78), the lighting regime is crafted to convey the stark gravity of the depiction which itself contrasts sharply with *Homeland*’s cultural status as a commercial media product.

This mode of framing deliberately underscores the inherent ambiguity within the classic dramatic metaphor of good as opposed to bad. What is strange here is that the distinction between the grainy shots with very dark shadows in the screen frame and the brighter colours and inferior quality of the image in the FUI frame creates figures of light

that make it appear that the forms are rising out of the FUI plane in relief. That the latter is lit with a stark and radiant light while the former is bathed in shadow rather ironically highlights how Carrie's feelings of uneasiness give rise to her shady actions, or to frame it another way, shows how 'terror produces terror' (Buck-Morss, 2003: 27). And yet while the emanating light is artificial with a cold and unpleasant tone of its own, in the second frame it acts as a strong directed source, making the creases and facial contours stand out. The blueish tint is not all complimentary to skin tones. The low-key lighting instils an eerie, almost claustrophobic moodiness into the scenes as we are left to contemplate the harsh shadows and fast falloff.

This dual framing of spying though the use of FUIs is a modern inflection that is now ubiquitous in film and television; however, the technique of frame within frames has been long established in the arts as a vehicle to add depth, draw focus, foreground subjects, overexpose and signify entrapment or isolation (Ward, 2003). *Homeland* adopts these practices wholesale in its depiction of spying and, moreover, constantly reminds viewers that they too are watching someone watching someone. While not as extreme as Facebook stalking, YouTube or Tik Tok reaction videos, the direct address to viewers in *House of Cards*, the second-person staging of press conferences in *Scandal* or the actual surveillance by Netflix's algorithmic monitoring and marketing, FUI framing has become the standard to depict the subtle thrill of surreptitiously spying to successfully glean incriminating information.

4.2.2 Shady Politics at Play

This doubling of screen perspectives acts a metafictional device inasmuch as it self-reflexively gestures to the topical anxiety currently in circulation in the United States. Take, for example, the political scandal around social media behemoth Facebook with regards to its negligence, if not outright complicity, in ‘discovering’ Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL), particularly their political data analytics firm, Cambridge Analytica, had improperly gathered the personal information of over eighty-seven million users without their consent (Hern, 2018). Public outrage with the malfeasance never really materialised and government’s ineffectual response resulted only in the bankruptcy of the company as spooked investors withdrew their capital after journalists’ reports in the US, UK and India exposed them to risk.

This is compounded with the allegations that this data analytic mercenary-for-hire company contracted with US President Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign team in targeted collusion with the Russian state to sway voters (Wharton, 2018) and the more recently verified massive cyber-breach of American federal agencies systems and business by Russian-backed hackers (Sanger, Perlroth and Schmitt, 2021). Taken with the economic devastation and unnecessary death wrought by the US’s government’s downplaying of the Covid-19 pandemic, the paranoid and panicked picture of the US that *Homeland* strives so carefully to depict begin to feel less like creative licence and more like a scarily prescient refraction of the broken Republican Party. Riven along the patently divisive lines of ethnonational populism, opportunistic and unsubstantiated falsities, blatant cronyism and dereliction (or delegation, to use a more absolved term) of duty, *Homeland* illustrates the deleterious effects that conflicts of interests between the splintering American political

ideology of individualism, arms profiteering and the indifferent depletion of natural resources have on [JB24] the already penurious position of the world's most vulnerable people through the lens of a television political thriller.

With Carrie's struggling to reconcile her being an American citizen, a reputable political agent and a disabled person, *Homeland's* ten year seriality offers a telling theme of America breaking apart under the incompatibility of individual privacy, human rights and public interest, manifesting as a fearful devaluation of diversity [JB25]. Moreover, when we consider that the 'visual protocol of spatial fragmentation [used] to represent surveillance' (Bevan, 2015: 148) in *Homeland* is staged as a transformation of private interiorities into national securitisation data, the suspicions that a blinking light on one's laptop or smart TV may very well indicate someone is spying on you is stimulated by the sense that commercial securitisation is equally, if not more, likely. Accordingly, spying on anyone is worth something if you look long enough. What seems to matter is why one is looking after you [JB26] and why you are looking after others.

In recognition of this existential crisis of American identity, *Homeland* is a fictional representation of a country politically divided both within and without, drawing from several concurrent crises. These 'crises' [JB27] further fracture across several planes throughout the series, scaling from the global to the self. At the international level, *Homeland's* primary season antagonists are portrayed as patently dangerous terrorists with their remote locations, unusual customs and foreign languages.³² The representation of these places is staged to be unfamiliar, chaotic and violent with derelict war-torn locales such as Afghanistan, Pakistan

³² Their difference is transliterally reinforced with subtitles of their foreign languages and sonically with the accentuation of harsh accents.

and Russia setting the scenes for most action, pursuit and explosion sequences; polite and finely-tailored formal diplomacy is reserved for Western-styled embassies, residences and cocktail parties with terse disagreements through clenched teeth civilly diffused by the petrified pretence of professional propriety^[JB28]. When *Homeland* turns inward, as in season seven when a story arc follows a group of American militants violently protesting the policies of the President from their fortified hideout (the location of which is deliberately left unspecified to create the sense that it could be anywhere in the American hinterlands), it crystallises the crisis of national identity, dividing friends, neighbours, colleagues and countrymen against^[JB29] one another, as they quibble over who is more patriotic and who qualifies as American.

This fracturing even occurs at the level of genre. Though political thrillers are rightly lauded for their swift adoption of contemporaneous themes and experimentation with generic hybridity, it is still somewhat surprising that *Homeland* is the first television political thriller with a female lead.³³ Since its debut, several other television political thrillers have followed suit with varying degrees of success. While the next two analysis chapters will discuss the aesthetic achievements of *Scandal* and *House of Cards* at length, further research could broaden the grouping comparatively to include television programmes which premiered too late for integration in this thesis: *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018), *Madame Secretary* (CBS, 2014-2019), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present) and (possibly) *The Politician* (Netflix,

³³ *La Femme Nikita* (USA Network, 1997-2001) and *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006) are interesting precursors to consider, and the latter initially was meant to be a case study in this thesis. However, the parameters of the political thriller female lead criterion hinges on a point of character agency, one that initiates her journey, rather than being compelled by external forces. Nikita is forced to become a spy under threat of being framed for murder she did not commit. While Sydney Bristow did choose to become a spy and the striking aesthetics of the series have been contentiously established (Abbot and Brown, 2007; Baldwin and Peacock, 2008), that she does not question the legitimacy of the CIA agency she operates for and the people she murders until the last season and that the tropes and motifs use more accurately situate *Alias* within the genre of science fiction.

2019-present). At the level of intersectional politics, the portrayal of Carrie as disabled also exhibits another shift in conventional generic characterisation that has a direct and positive impact on the affectivity of Dane's magnetic performance.

While commentary on the performative nuance Danes exhibits is generally positive, negative criticism by journalists of the stereotypical portrayals of foreigners (Haynes, 2018; Cohen, 2013) in *Homeland* can be viewed through the lens of individuation in Murray Smith's theory of character engagement. It could be argued that the robed extras who populate the background in long-shots of foreign scenic compositions constitute a stereotypical ambiguation of agency^[JB30], yet the same is true of the suited extras that range about scenes in Western society. This realist simulation exploits Durkheim's 'double existence' of community (1973), maintaining the unfamiliarity of foreign regions as a matter of plot necessity; it would impede narrative flow if the viewer's attention became too detached from Carrie. Rather than impractically plotting the gradation of beliefs between background characters^[JB31], ideological difference is structurally subsumed into the story, our perception instead attuned to the portrayal of foreigners in a propositional feeling^[JB32] of the locale setting as 'not American'.

It also establishes the feeling of momentum that comes from the changing locations every season. This sense of movement is further reinforced by the shakiness of the handheld floating camera as well as the constant shooting in cars and pursuit of and the running away from action (using tracking shots). Thus, the tone of *Homeland* is urgent, propelling and exciting viewers with topical geopolitical references as 'real' narrative crises depicting the opposing moral values of characters as a fracturing national consciousness. The geopolitical backdrop, fracturing of framing and lighting regime woven together by *Homeland* dovetails

into a novel form of political thriller that frames contrast as moral conflict^[JB33]. The programme's heavy reliance on subjective camera placements makes it feel more documentary than voyeuristic. Narratively speaking, *Homeland* foregrounds Carrie's being a CIA agent as an encapsulation of her conflicted sense of American identification (of self and nation) that is at odds with the humanity of other characters she interacts with. This creates drama in her private life because she must conceal both her private interiority and professional activities from everyone.

This is most evident when Carrie engages in spying action throughout the series. From her persistent surveillance of Brody in seasons one and two to her secretive installation of video cameras and listening devices in the President's Chief of Staff's residence in season eight, Carrie is perpetually trying to balance her belief that she is protecting the nation with the knowledge that her means of shining light onto her suspicions is unquestionably illegal, often resulting in her suspension or termination. That spying is Carrie's primary modus operandi is significant because it typically entails a counter narrative element of constantly pretending and disavowing her unorthodox methods and skill set. The inevitable result is confusion and an internal dissonance that arises from keeping secrets from those whose opinions supposedly matter most (e.g., the family whom she is ostensibly protecting and the superiors who employ and trust her to do what is right).

4.3 Characterising Carrie

Besides the use of light and colour, one of the most effective ways *Homeland* conveys emotion is through the matrix of the meticulous writing, Danes' expressive performance and

viewer's concomitant character engagement with Carrie. As a method actor³⁴ (Danes, 2012), Danes' preparation for the role of Carrie entailed many months of extensive research into the background of her character, namely, people with mental illness and the functional hierarchies of the CIA (Thorpe, 2012), in addition to substituting her affective memory to act *as if* she were in the same situation. In an interview with NPR, Danes recalls how, as a child actor, 'there was a kind of burgeoning OCD, because a lot of the behavior was ritualistic. These creatures that I "saw" would to [sic] talk to me and tell me to do things like ... hold a contorted position for 20 minutes or something' (Gross, 2020). Synthesising these physical sensations with an acting career spanning thirty-five years allowed her to develop an intimate backstory and portray Carrie as if she were a real person.

Rudolf Laban's movement theory provides a useful way of looking at performance through the categories of body, effort, shape and shape and space in *The Mastery of Movement on the Stage* (1950) although Lisa Ullman's spearheaded subsequent edition (2011) refines the categorisation into body, effort, space and relationship with shape being interwoven into body, space and relationship. Accordingly, Danes' mobilisation of breathing in a patterned sequence of sound and contortion of facial muscle tensions channels the specificity of her body structure's innate functionality into Carrie's physiological and vocal tonality, affectively using her body as the schema for pitch changes in Carrie's

³⁴ 'Method acting' is a partial refinement of Russian theatre actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski system of performance as an 'expression of deep passion' (2008: 26). His emphasis on experiencing the role through sense memory *as if* being a character prevents the affective 'flow' of a performance from becoming too staged, wooden or mechanical; the audience would then be reacting to 'real' emotions rather than the representation of them (Benedetti, 2005).

³⁵ In an interview at Paleyfest (an annual television festival held in Los Angeles), when probed about what she is thinking about when Carrie cries, Danes exclaims 'it's just what my face does!'. She later elaborates, saying, 'I'm not thinking, I'm feeling' (Danes, 2015).

³⁶ Tonus refers to the constant state of partial contraction in muscle tissue that facilitates its response to stimulation.

interiority and intensity. In other words, Danes uses her body, breathing and facial muscles to express Carrie's characteristic patterns of interiority and physical activity.

Danes' performance is most melodramatic when she is intensely conveying Carrie's changing, conflicted or devolving emotional states, through her interrelated facial expressions and vocal inflections. As these scenes progress, the shots change from medium to medium close-ups to close-ups with a dolly centripetally encircling her face, building proximate tension. Her face contorts into a tell-tale grimace, famously parodied by Anne Hathaway as 'Carrie face' on *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975 – present), before the skin subtly shifts into an array of unstable affectivity. She has perfected portraying pained physiognomy since first weeping her way to her first Golden Globe win for *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995). Arguing 'extreme negative affect is extremely punishing' (Angel and Gibbs: 2006: 32), being witness to such affective intensity is extremely taxing, not just on the actor but also to others on set.

Dave Harewood, who played Carrie's boss David Estes for two seasons, recounts his awe in watching Danes during shooting, because her performance was so exhausting that he feared for her safety when she would drive home at the end of the day. He recalls that

she was extraordinary. I remember one occasion when you could see how her intensity ramped up from the wide shot, and when it got to the close-up it was incredible. I actually dried, I forgot my lines, I was staring at her, watching it happen in front of me. She has an intensity and complete immersion in the character and I've never really encountered that before at that level (Saner, 2014: 4).

Danes' ability to exude power, attention to details and willingness to push herself to the extreme for her art, led creators Gansa and Gordon to write the pilot with Danes in mind for Carrie's mixture of raw personal vulnerability and exceptional professional competence

and the oscillating emotions and improvised and sharp reactions required to (im)balance the two. David Nevins, then president of entertainment at Showtime, proposed Carrie's bipolar disorder but 'it's not that [he] didn't want to make her reliable^[JB40] [sic] to the audience. [He] wanted to make her less reliable to the authorities' (O'Connell, 2020: part I). Danes, who has just completed the miniseries *Temple Grandin* (HBO, 2010), a biopic about the autistic scientist and prominent activist for the humane treatment of livestock and for which she won Emmy, Screen Actors Guild, Golden Globe and Satellite awards for Best Actress, 'felt charged up to do something similarly thrilling and scary' (O'Connell, 2020: part I). From these early kernels and ideations, Carrie emerges as one the most captivating television antiheroines.

The transgression of conventional legal, moral and ethical boundaries is aligned with a recent trend in television production that sees an emphasis on 'female-centred forms with a particular focus on the liminality of women associated with criminality' (Buonanno, 2017: xi) as compatible with the depiction of political espionage, disrupting the convention of having male-centric protagonists^[JB41] that conventionally populate the genre of political thrillers. These 'antiheroines' articulate a private sense of self that is 'defined by self-reliance and personal initiative' (Buonanno, 2017: 75) and contrast with an idea of the collective, despite Carrie's assertions that her actions remain in service to the 'greater good.' Because this 'in-betweenness' publicly conceals the contours of Carrie's interiority while privately defining her agency^[JB42], her character expands the concept of the antiheroine with her unapologetic social- and gender-defiant behaviour that challenges conventional tropes of professionalism and motherhood. In fact, Carrie's dangerous coupling of motherhood and self-interest often has

destructive consequences for all family members involved, while the same can be said of the relation between her professional ethics and employers' reactions.

By the end of season three, Carrie's counterpart Brody has been killed in Iran on trumped up charges of treason, and disavowed by the CIA and the US government, abandoned by the very institutions from which he sought redemption. While the success of the first three seasons owes much to the virtuoso performances of Danes and Lewis, Carrie and Brody's love arc and indeed Brody's narrative usefulness were at an end. This was a wise production decision because their romantic story line was increasingly drawing attention away from Carrie as the central protagonist, risking the series becoming about their relationship and the collateral damage it causes.

Of course, traces of the union linger in later seasons: Carrie has given birth to their daughter, whom she unceremoniously dumps with her sister, after a chillingly brutal sequence in which she nearly drowns her infant daughter in the bathtub, attesting to her aversion to motherhood. Freed from the inconvenience of domestic, familial and intimate psychosexual entanglements, Carrie resumes in earnest her descent into moral and ethical ambiguity in Islamabad. This has disastrous effects when, after her hasty decision to conceal relevant information, she authorises a drone strike that not only fails to kill the intended target but also results in the death of forty civilians, she nevertheless blackmails her way into a promotion. To satisfy her questionable ethics, Carrie becomes increasingly reliant on her spying skills. As she increasingly resorts to such unorthodox methods, she becomes isolated and must lie, coerce and cajole associates to help her. Her attempts to manipulate others are usually effective apart from Saul, who, like regular viewers, has become inured to Carrie's temperament and the idiosyncratic signs of her deception.

4.3.1 Framing a Fractured Mind

So how do the camera and cinematography in *Homeland* focus the broad scope of spying to convey Carrie's subjective interiority more narrowly? First, recall that the notion of a character's psychical interiority being graspable via onscreen compositions is only tenable because the camera shifts us through a virtual three-dimensional space. This spatial architecture functions not simply as a representation of 'real' space, but as a construction of volume (in the artistic sense) to produce depth (in the broadest meaning of the term). If we can define Carrie as a fictional character 'with an inner life that exists as [a] communicatively constructed artifact' (Mittell, 2015: 118), then the televisual frame should be able to convey Carrie's subjective interiority (or state of being) within objective camera framing techniques that can be seen in solo scenes when the *mise en scène* envelops Carrie.

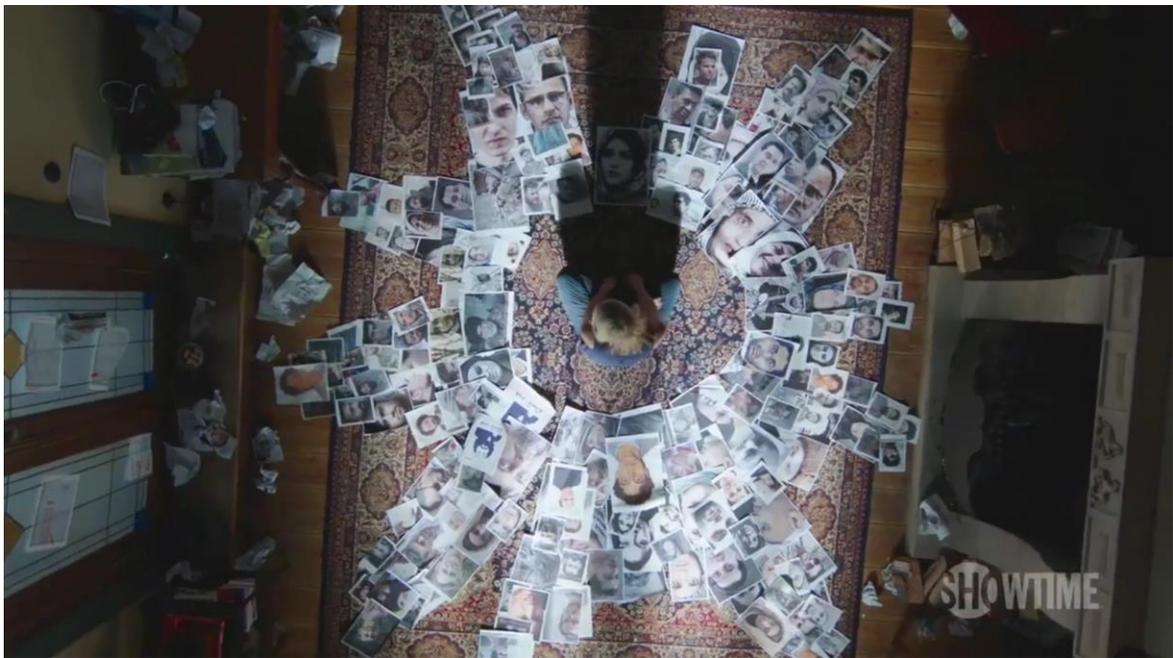


Figure 4 – Carrie taps into her manic state due to coming off her medication (S5E3)

How is this possible? First, the purposive arrangement of actor, camera and mise en scène during shooting is doubly manipulated in editing. This recombination of scenes and sound, special effects and exciting affects, creates a composition that reorders our ‘natural’ relation to space and time. In television, the commonly comprehended self-contained unit – the episode – can alter the perception of time within the narrative through various conventional techniques. Flashbacks render the past in the present while flashforwards anticipate the future within the spatial confines of the present action. Episodes can also superimpose on the screen two spatially separated events, creating layers of transparency that link the various elements of a shot to reveal hidden character motivations or to simply play with our perception of reality.

Homeland often uses a more refined version director Christopher Chapman’s multi-dynamic image technique (Keating, 2014) to draw our attention to the way television can alter our sense of space by showing how the advanced technology of spying can easily subsume distance. Indeed, that *Homeland* is shot on the ARRI ALEXA PLUS (a more detailed discussion on this camera series occurs in later chapters) in 1.78:1 (or 16:9) aspect ratio with its vertical dimension diminished, allows the viewer to feel the excessive horizontal space as an uncomfortable kind of containment of an expansive temperament under external pressure and a woman’s struggle against the establishment she remains beholden to.

Moreover, when using the frame within frame technique, *Homeland* show us how Carrie’s mind has begun to fracture under the strain of spying. While, as we will see in the next chapter, the deployment of such techniques in *Scandal* visually demonstrates Olivia’s professional prescience and organisational acumen, in *Homeland* it serves to indicate that Carrie has begun to succumb to the darker aspects of her illness. Once again in *Homeland*,

the viewer is made to feel as though we are also spying, not merely on the characters as they go about their business, but indeed on their concealed interiority.

4.3.2 Interiority

Interiority may be understood simply as the quality of being of an interior. Although weak in comparison to literary exposition of reliable omniscient third-person narration, in film and television interiority refers to the deduction of a character's thoughts and feelings as reactions to circumstantial narrative events (Potts, 2005). Films such as the dramedy *Being John Malkovich* (2000) and sci-fi action *Inception* (2010) depict interiority as dialogue between characters in the mindscape of an individuated person that other characters can enter and from where they can observe events. Comedic television programmes like *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001-2009; ABC, 2009-2010) and *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–2006; Netflix, 2013–present) provide us with the lead character's persistent voiceover as a soliloquised evaluating interiority which only viewers are ever privy to. Reality television programmes where interior confinement is both forced and a formulaic catalyst for dramatic events such as the US *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000-present) and its regional variants or a more recent UK programme, the immensely popular *Love Island* (ITV2, 2015-present), explicitly capitalise on this mode with their 'Diary Room' feature that acts as a 'safe space' where participants are free to confess their innermost feelings and private thoughts away from the rest of their housemates.

Since there are no scenes where we are omnisciently inside Carrie's mind and there is no fully subjective camera POV or voiceover that assumes Carrie's perspective, interiority comes into view in increasing recurrences of isolated camera set-ups, showing her

deliberating one course of action over another. In Figure 5, taken from season two, episode two, Carrie has just discovered that she is being shut out of a debriefing in Langley regarding her recent exploits in Beirut, during which she attempted to gather intelligence that would prevent an imminent attack on the US. However, Carrie only travelled to Beirut as a private citizen, since her CIA employment had been terminated in the previous season and the contact she established eight years earlier would only speak with her.

Here, we can view Carrie's interiority as the set of physical reactions and mental deliberations that condition the decisions she makes. And yet, because the latter is invisible, we must deduce how Carrie is feeling from her facial expressions in relation to the surrounding *mise en scène* and atmospheric music. This technique is found across television drama, and is perhaps most obvious in soap operas, where the camera close-up 'focuses viewer attention almost exclusively on facial expression' (Allen, 1985: 66), and an explicit alteration between objective camera framing and subjective POV is exceedingly rare: 'visual



Figure 5 – upon being denied reinstatement by the CIA, Carrie nearly has a breakdown (S2E2)

subjectivity in soap operas is reserved for prolepses' (Allen, 1985: 66). In this dramatic framing of interiority, the overall impression is one of a *tronie*³⁷ that is not meant to create a flattering image of Carrie's emotional state. The shadows on her downcast furrowed face convey a sense of inwardness, isolation and despair.

When interviewed about the thought process she has during Carrie's histrionics, Danes replies 'sad things', though her later clarification that during Carrie's more melodramatic moments, 'I'm not really thinking, I'm feeling' (Danes, 2015), suggests a wringing effort as the scrunching of her eyebrows [theJB44] and tightening of the muscles and the skin pushes the dejected affective force from her interiority out of her eye. As the elevator descends to its terminal floor, she sharply shifts her body from side to side, mirrored by the camera motion and reflected off the walls. She lifts her head into light, quickly extending her arm to shakily drag away her finger along the underside of her eye to remove the welling effusion of tears. It is a delicate [actionJB45] to conceal her disappointment despite succeeding in her professional brief before the elevator doors open.

Denied the possibility of reinstatement, Carrie's reaction in the elevator is emblematic of an austere *mise en scène* whose affect is designed to be negative, devastating and revelatory of her private state of mind. Carrie's dejection is made viscerally palpable as the enclosed space restricts her movement and frames the parallel lines as prison bars (and the borders from the maze in the main title sequence). *Homeland* unusually benefits from the vertical compression of its aspect ratio in this aspect (pun intended), as the volume of the space and the elongated horizontal make her seem trapped and confined. The shot is a

³⁷ A *tronie* (from the Dutch word for face) is a type of portraiture exemplified by Renaissance Dutch painters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer. The subject is always human and depicted in such a way to emphasize their individuality, usually unflattering and with exaggerated facial expressions.

medium close-up that pans along with her agitated and restricted pacing to follow her heavily shadowed face as it contorts and grimaces. We know that Carrie does not have claustrophobia so her emotional reaction must correspond with her despair. There is a strong sadness here, as its physical manifestation – crying – is visible only to us. Such a scene offers a sensitive portrayal of Carrie’s interiority that bypasses cognition and can **viscerally connect with engaged viewers**^[JB46].

When we are isolated and enclosed with Carrie, here the elevator assumes a negative volume with her figure as the only positive substance. Since ‘the close-up has more aesthetic energy than a long shot, it delivers a higher-impact punch’ (Zettl, 2016: 206); Carrie modulates the grey and darkened space with her dolour and distraught comportment, causing the brief scene to become suffused with an enveloping and wrenching sadness that is only ever privately expressed. There is little in the way of light, save a diffuse and faint tungsten overhead key light: here *Homeland* encloses us with Carrie and gives us intimate access into her private frame of mind.

Many of the elements in this seemingly barren scene follow from the cinematographic discussion earlier; moreover, they combine to establish part of the style of the show, particularly when it comes to showing Carrie’s shifting mental state. As this scene marks the beginning of a depressive episode that will lead to Carrie nearly committing suicide, we can begin to see how the objective camera (in this case a narrow-angle lens)³⁸ functions to display

³⁸ As it fills the screen with a restricted area of the scene, ‘the narrow angle lens gives a “telescopic” view of the subject...whereas a normal lens angle provides a natural perspective, the narrow angle lens shows an apparently compressed perspective’ (Millerson, 1994: 36).

her interiority. This is achieved by recognising the internal-orientated functions of light³⁹ and then considering the televisual human face as a coordinating referent for complex (and often conflicted) interiority. As it would disrupt the narrative momentum and confuse the intended tone of the show to use voiceover or some dialogic form to convey Carrie's interiority, *Homeland* uses low-key lighting to imply her current psychological makeup and emotional state.

In keeping with *Homeland*'s (un)naturalistic realism and emphasis on spying, interiority cannot be visible to others in the storyworld however much it might lead to purposive action by Carrie. Instead, it is narratively constructed as an intensification of personally distressing circumstances and disorientation that ultimately manifest themselves in her excessively expressive or melodramatic face.⁴⁰ In *Homeland*, we become even more acutely aware of its pathos when characters are enclosed within an austere *mise en scène*, where movement or freedom are limited, and in deeply darkened spaces that invoke the hidden containment of interiority such as cells, private chambers, interrogation rooms and various residential rooms. It is, in fact, the way in which we as loyal viewers can recall how Carrie contorts in this manner that aligns to our sympathy with her. A particular grimace of her lips or widening of her eyes becomes emblematic of her pain; coupled with her histrionic speech – though frequently criticised as Danes' overacting (Lahr, 2013) – is a melodramatic

³⁹ Zettl (2016) argues that 'lighting orients viewers in space'; that is, 'it shows us how objects should look...the use of lighting to articulate the outer environment is known as outer orientation' (26) 'the specific inner orientation functions of lighting are: establishing mood and atmosphere, above- and below-eye-level key-light position, predictive lighting, and the use of light and lighting instruments as dramatic agents' (30).

⁴⁰ The characterisation of film melodrama as inferior to classical realism (Brooks, 1976; Gledhill and Williams, 2018) has led to a tendency to read 'excessive pathos, emotions and theatricality as pejorative' (Steward, 2014: 3) rather than merely being a descriptive term that orientates 'action, thrills and sensation' (Steward, 2014: 3) and the performative 'achievement of a felt good, the merger...of morality and feeling' (Williams, 1998: 55).

event that accumulates in our memories and creates a ‘highly elaborated character^{JB47]} of greater accumulation and depth’ (Pearson, 2007: 56).

This scene is also representative of one the two types of vocalisation Carrie uses during her melodramatic moments. Either she produces voiceless staccato and syncopated whispered expirations when alone accompanied with a low reverberating tone (here in the soft tremulous hum of the elevator motion) and camera pans or her theatrical histrionics are modulated by a sustained and heightened pitch which rapidly increases in tempo and sound volume (as the spatial volume is interfered with by circumstantial narrative events such as other characters in a meeting or hideout). The appreciative and sympathetic viewer equates both with melodrama, transforming Carrie’s negative affect into aesthetic pleasure.

4.3.3 A Melodramatic Affliction

Portraying interiority in this manner is not entirely new. One noteworthy antecedent is the biopic film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), not least because of its rarity in presenting persons with mental illness in their multifacetedness rather than simply as violent psychopaths, but also because it beautifully renders the complex entanglements of love, reality and mental illness with a visual dynamism and formal technicality that won it the Best Picture in the Academy Awards, BAFTA and Golden Globes in 2002. Given the lead character’s descent into paranoid-schizophrenia (and his ultimate recovery) was inspired by real-life mathematician John Nash who famously won the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economics, director Ron Howard’s task was to somehow convey how the illness gradually consumed Nash over decades, within 135 minutes of screen time.

To accomplish this requires a consistent and almost constant viewer alignment with Nash's perspective without resorting to the unwieldy strict first-person POV⁴¹ throughout, though there are voiceovers and differential lighting that served to indicate his hallucinations to viewers. Of course, credit must also go to English cinematographer Roger Deakins, who alternates between high- and low-key lighting to move between lucidity and confusion, to occasionally align the moving camera with Nash's POV and often employs crane and dolly moves or circling Steadicam shots. While early on this strategy underscores the anxiety and excitement of Nash's academic life, later it helps magnify his increasingly frightening bouts of paranoia. It also offers a contrast to the visually static representation of Nash's 'recovery', which finds him heavily medicated.

The influence on *Homeland*'s televisual style is apparent as it appears to take its aesthetic cue from *A Beautiful Mind* insofar as it strives to coherently negotiate the portrayal of its protagonist's mental state. However, since paranoid-schizophrenia and bipolar disorder present with different symptoms, *Homeland* uses slightly different techniques. It offers visual signifiers of Carrie's increasing instability: unkempt hair, excessive consumption of alcohol, increased impersonal sexual liaisons, lack of or inability to sleep; and a maudlin 'combination of close-ups and extreme close-ups [which] isolate characters with a mental illness, thus "displaying their difference"' (Middleton, 2003: 186).

We are first made aware of Carrie's mental health issues from a flashback in the pilot episode. We discover that she was initially diagnosed with bipolar disorder while still in

⁴¹ It is important to recognise that the persistent difficulty in shooting an entire film in the so-called first-person POV arguably arises from a fundamental misunderstanding of what such cinematography even signifies. In literature, first-person narration is when protagonists speak as themselves. Thus, a subjective perspective in cinema is not first-person at all. Instead, the POV film would be best defined as second-person cinema, akin to the use of 'you' to convey the subjective perspective in literature.

college. She conceals her condition from her colleagues at the CIA and manages it with the secret administering of medication from her sister (as its admission would preclude her employment). Drawing on her research with bipolar sufferers, it is of note that [JB48] numerous plaudits have praised Danes for her consistent accuracy in terms of the disease's symptoms, behavioural characteristics and emotional volatility (Mitchell, 2018).

On the other hand, *Homeland* has been criticised for its suggestion that, left unchecked and un-medicated, the illness imbues its sufferer with preternaturally heightened powers of sensory perception or intuition (Scalambrino, 2014). While it is illogical to persist in the expectation that a fictional television programme must or should literally depict reality in all its representational aspects, this causality is moreover a misreading of the text. Danes herself envisions Carrie as a complex antiheroine whose health, safety and innate perceptive and intellectual abilities are frequently compromised when she discontinues her medication, noting 'she is full of contradictions. She's so capable in so many ways and in others she's so ultimately unreliable...I wanted to play [her as a] "Carrie who occasionally becomes unhinged"' (Schip, 2012: par. 4).

Since bipolar disorder is generally characterised by bouts of sedentary and unproductive depression punctuated by episodes of erratic or violent mania, *Homeland* uses jazz music to shift to the frenetic state of change in Carrie's interiority. If we recall the main title sequence as the televisual equivalent of narrative background that sets up the metaphorical and storyworld premises and assumptions, there are several shots of a young Carrie playing the trumpet which presumably led to an early love, or at least an affinity, for jazz music. This is no mere coincidence because 'Carrie's characterization hybridizes the troubled female investigator with the moral ambiguity and irreverent toughness of the hard-

boiled noir hero' (Steenberg and Tasker, 2015: 136); jazz music is used as the scaffolding upon which to build up the level of narrative and character ambiguity that makes *Homeland* so pleasurable to watch.

4.3.4 Breaking Down to the Bleats

One of the most distinctive features about jazz is that it is a musical genre that relies heavily on improvisation and rhythmic urgency (Berendt and Huesmann, 2009). In fact, improvisation is the main way jazz musicians express their individual style. As the form requires them to be innovative to distinguish their oeuvre, jazz artists continually change the rhythm of a melody. The rhythm of jazz is often syncopated (or ragged, hence the term 'ragtime music'⁴²), which is when accents occur on the off-beat, and it may be polyrhythmic, which is when multiple, contrasting rhythms occur at the same time (Berendt and Huesmann, 2009).

Whether in her capacity as a CIA agent (seasons 1 – 4), legal aid advisor (season 6), private head of security (season 5), or going it alone as free agent with spurious associates (season 7 – 8), much of what is enjoyable about watching *Homeland* is seeing how Carrie too embodies a spirit of improvisation, though this is characterised as impulsive by her colleagues, erratic by her family, or is self-styled as 'trusting my gut'. Common in detective and classic noir films, in *Homeland* this trope is reimagined as Carrie's strange compulsion to expose hidden geopolitical truths despite the dissociation from her dual identity that fails

⁴² Ragtime music is a simple and syncopated musical style with individual pieces referred to as 'rags'. Though the form is the precursor to jazz, it was written as sheet music and was intended to be played exactly as scored. It is characterised by recapitulation, 16 measure segments, tonic to dominant harmonic movements and having a machine-like quality (2020; Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz).

to account for the harmful affects her dogged determination has on herself or those around her. In this state of mental fragmentation and abnegation, Carrie embodies the fundamental tension at the heart of thrillers – she is forever at odds with herself as she unpredictably yet inevitably shifts back and forth between madness and lucidity, mystery and knowing, darkness and light – because for her, ‘folly and madness are deeply intertwined with her genius’ (Williams, 2017: 40). This irreconcilable contradiction is evident to anyone who gets to ‘know’ her; once discovering her affair with Brody, Saul yells in exasperation, ‘you’re the smartest and the dumbest fucking person I’ve ever known!’

The dissonant bleating of the jazz soundtrack in the background during scenes of her mania-induced surveillance, pre-emptive actions and unrelenting pursuit of enemies or ideas, along with her subsequent justifications, paradoxically laud jazz’s shift from its erstwhile position as a fringe musical style into contemporary mainstream media culture, while simultaneously reifying the notion that mental illness and mental acuity – or creativity – are contrasting aspects of expressivity that often differ only in degree (Jamison, 1993). Furthermore, this undulating counterbalance becomes even more impressive when we begin to appreciate the way in which it simulates access into Carrie’s interiority.

While the link between jazz and mental illness may be tenuous (Poole, 2003), it has been confirmed that Louisiana native Charles ‘Buddy’ Bolden (or King Bolden, as he is regarded as jazz royalty) was afflicted with schizophrenia to such an extent that he was unable to ‘read music and the only way he was able to play his cornet was by improvising’ (BBC, 2001: par. 7). According to Professor Sean Spence, of the department of psychiatry at the University of Sheffield, Bolden ‘had to improvise because he could not play tunes in a useful way. He could not read music and he had to make up things as he went on. If we had

not had this improvised music then it would just have continued as ragtime'⁴³ (BBC, 2001: par. 9-11). One study of forty musicians in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Poole, 2003) suggests that there are increased levels of psychopathy, particularly mood disorders, in jazz musicians.

Regardless of whether a causal relation between mental illness and artistic virtuosity is ultimately proved, a deeper appreciation of *Homeland* is enabled by acknowledging popular conceptions of and narratives around jazz, and by simply listening to the music and identifying how it is used. In *Homeland*, jazz is chosen with great care, and with consideration to the specific qualities associated with certain jazz artists and performers. At least in the beginning of the series, the jazz music was an auditory signifier for Carrie and her immediate CIA supervisor and mentor Saul's respective interiorities and their contrasting approaches – Carrie prefers the more brash and experimental Thelonious Monk while Saul's tastes tended towards the smoother, more accessible sounds of Monk's contemporary John Coltrane. It is therefore not surprising that Monk's music is used to characterise Carrie's chaotic impression of the world [JB50].

Monk became famous for his persistent reinvention of the different modes and idioms of jazz (Gourse, 1997). As a musician he became known for his use of haphazardly atonal

⁴³ While Bolden enjoyed success with his band for almost seven years, in 1906 Bolden's mental state had begun to deteriorate rapidly and so severely that in 1907, at the age of twenty-eight, he was involuntarily committed to the Louisiana State Insane Asylum in Jackson after attacking his mother. Sadly, according to his biographer Donald M. Marquis of New Orleans, 'in those days when a black man went to Jackson or any insane asylum, 99 percent of the time it was a one-way trip. They didn't have medication, they didn't have people working with them' (Karst, 2016). Although the totality of his oeuvre has been lost to history, oral accounts testify to the enormity of his influence on the genre, as these elements are still used today: using brass instruments to play the blues, invented funk (which is now a subgenre of jazz) and the 'Big Four' – 'the first syncopated bass drum pattern to deviate from the standard on-the-beat march' (Murphy, 2017).

compositions that seemed recklessly to dismiss what the rhythm might otherwise dictate. Eschewing the bebop mode of his earlier years, Monk went on to develop a style that unpredictably (for first-time listeners) used percussive playing, unusual repetitions and dissonant sounds, particularly ‘the half diminished chord... [which would become] an essential part of his harmonic language, partly because of the dissonance’ (Kelly, 2010: 465). It is therefore appropriate that *Homeland* chose to pair Carrie to Thelonious’s music, given that her disorder colours her cognition and behaviour with a randomness and spontaneity that invariably leads to the termination of her employment across the seasons. Like Monk’s music, which often violated the so-called fundamental rules of traditional music theory, Carrie’s investigative methods are hard to explain and even more difficult to predict.

Also impressive, but subtler, is the unexpected way in which jazz music is also used to stress the many problems that Carrie must contend with because of her gender. The difficulty that early jazz had being taken seriously by mainstream musicians and record companies alike is akin to the way in which Carrie’s impulsivity makes her male superiors uncomfortable. Indeed, she is often made to feel insecure as though she is crazy (in the strictly negative sense) and that her work has no substantive merit. Despite being her mentor, Saul often questions Carrie’s rationale, and viewers are left on tenterhooks wondering whether her actions will be ultimately vindicated by the value of its usefulness or if she will be unceremoniously dismissed as erratically breaking protocol due to the diminished rational capacity of an overemotional (and mentally ill) female.

This intentionally taut uncertainty is part of what makes *Homeland* work on an affective level. As viewers, we never really know whether *Homeland* is setting up its viewers, as it did in season two when the entire story arc that centred on Carrie’s hospitalisation,

professional rejection and subsequent revenge-seeking turned out to be merely a narrative red herring. Moreover, linking Carrie's interiority to the unpredictability, complexity and transgressive qualities of jazz music (embodied by the intensity and effusiveness of Danes' melodramatic performance) yields a character torn between ruthless determination (hope) and profound sadness (fear). As Carrie's emotional state unpredictably shifts between these two poles, functioning as *Homeland*'s central internal conflict, viewers are surprised by the actions she takes yet recognise the sacrifices she makes to reach her desired goal – the securitisation of the nation. Indeed, *Homeland* succeeds because it frames some of the many instantiations of contrast – whether that be of darkness (and chiaroscuro lighting), knowledge (and spying), wellbeing (and mental illness), maleness (and antiheroism), vulnerability (and strength), objectivity (and interiority) or even musical rules (and jazz) and normativity (and unorthodoxy) – into sharp conflict, tying them to the affective oppositions of the genre.

By contrasting the characterisation of Carrie with that of Saul as her main character foil, *Homeland* strains the limits of their relationship even though they apparently shared many of the same goals regarding American security. In the climatic series finale, Saul even comes to represent the CIA, and by extension, the US government itself, when Carrie must decide whether to betray Saul to prevent the escalation of nuclear armament by Pakistan in response to the US's erroneous retaliation for the Taliban's false claim of Pakistani sponsored culpability in the helicopter crash killing the President on his visit to the region. As their final scene together, the confrontation takes place at Saul's residence, where several episodes earlier, Carrie deduced the existence of Saul's longest-running asset in the GRU (the primary intelligence service of the Russian Armed Forces) by painstakingly decoding valuable

intelligence concealed in the bindings of small red editions of classical literary works, hidden in plain sight on his bookshelves.

In a deal with a KGB operative Yevgeny Gromov (Costa Ronan), who incidentally rescues her from her detention and torture in a Russian gulag during season seven, Russia is willing to turn over the helicopter's black box recordings they recovered to exonerate Pakistan and neutralise the nuclear threat while claiming international credit and goodwill for a price...the identity of Saul's Russian spy. He remained steadfast, refusing to betray his long-time asset for his own life. Though distressed by the hollowness of Carrie's threats of murder (the protégé he has groomed in statecraft), Saul trusts her hunches implicitly and staunchly defends her against her detractors in the government throughout the series. Perturbed but understanding, Carrie makes the ultimate sacrifice to prevent war. The camera pulls out achingly slowly as the look of pride slowly spreads across his face in his realisation that rather than betray him, Carrie reconciles the conflict of self and nation in her double existence, melding herself into a double agent with Saul as her handler, in full awareness and control of her split personhood and purpose.

4.4 Contemplating Duality

In the previous sections, I have demonstrated that *Homeland* merits aesthetic appreciation because the programme masterfully juxtaposes the sensory expectations of the thriller genre with a riveting storyline that dramatises much contemporary political unease in the United States (and the world at large). Coordinating its thematic concerns with [JB52]the artistic techniques just discussed enhances *Homeland*'s affective impact and consequent pleasure. To clarify, the coordinated arrangement of the concepts of interiority and privacy are

balanced with luminosity and spying to affect a kind of existential affective harmony between the poles of suspense, namely, hope and fear via contrast. Though this relation is often conceived as a kind of irreconcilable tension, it is perhaps better to consider them as the necessary opposition of ontological entities.

The duality of things that *Homeland* repeatedly highlights in both its thematic concerns and its technical execution recreates the anxiety that functions as the core expectant emotion of thrillers. In thrillers, as in much film and television fare, this double bind is more dynamically affective (or suspenseful) when the viewer engages in an empathetic protagonist identification (Zillmann, 2013; Metz, 1990), whereby they hope that the character achieves his or her ^{JB53} goals whilst simultaneously fearing that they will not. Indeed, our enjoyment of thrillers is at least partially dependent on this mercurial ambiguity. In the case of *Homeland*, our pleasure depends more on how a particular viewer feels about the themes and characters in Smith's sympathetic character attachment. While Carroll's view that the emotional struggle Carrie exhibits and whether her unorthodox methods will result in her triumphing over both her illness and her professional detractors is certainly entertaining and thrilling enough to sustain thriller genre aficionados and fans of Danes, the valences of Smith's structures of sympathy are ^{JB54} ultimately impacted by viewer's social subjectivity. For example, a viewer who has lost faith in the 'liberty and justice for all' of the American pledge of allegiance may not be as interested in the backchannel diplomacy that keeps the US safe (or in power, depending on your perspective), or a staunch misogynist might remain disinclined to accept Carrie's antiheroism as a rejection of patriarchy and the heterosexual scripts that proscribe women's subordinate relationship to power (Gorton, 2009).

Moreover, the possibility that she will ultimately prevail in exposing and preventing whatever national threat forms the basis of a season's story arc is considered a positive outcome while her losing her mind, credibility and daughter are viewed as negative outcomes. While *Homeland's* thrilling account of government-sponsored espionage strives to convey the hypocrisy, tensions and contradictions in the American political system, asking viewers to reevaluate the judgement of Carrie as she navigates this terrain right up until the very last episode, it also prompts us reconsider calcified notions of morality, ethics, family and nation. That the trajectory of the programme terminates on an enigmatic note as Carrie continues on a path of multiple alignments is essential to finishing with a suspenseful, and therefore, thrilling experience (Zillmann, 2013) as the viewer is left to consider his or her own divided allegiances.

The delightful relationship between fear and hope is comprehended as the phenomenological experience of thrills (Balint, 2018) such that our pleasure in the sensation of fear is transformed by the safe distance afforded by the screen into 'a positive form of experience' (Klippel, 1990: 85) of the sublime. It is remarkably strange that the sense of fear and loss of control repeatedly induced by *Homeland's* formal aesthetic and dramaturgical properties and 'enfolded in a double sense of security' (Mikos, 1996: 41) (that of genre and 'the apparative and dispositive structure' (45)), appears to run counter-parallel to the excitement and hope that too forms the composite tenor of its aesthetic experience. But this dualistic structure nevertheless produces an inversely harmonic and counterbalanced narrative progression that sustains suspense through the polarly 'structured horizon of anticipation' (Carroll, 2013: 75).

Since *Homeland*'s story arc too presents only two possible outcomes (i.e., will Carrie's hunches work out or not), we can argue that hope and fear are durably contrasting chords of sentiment that do not cancel each other out but which instead create a sensorially pleasurable dissonance of oppositions. Adorno notes that 'the sensual ultimately encroaches upon the opposite in pleasure because, even as the remotest echo, pleasure is sensed in (its specific) negation. For this aesthetic sensorium dissonance bears all too closely on its contrary' (1997: 18) by transfiguring what is into its antithesis (and vice versa) – the 'aesthetic archetype of ambivalence' (ibid, 17).⁴⁴ As alluded to in chapter 2, this ambivalence is already reified representationally within the narrative as Carrie's antiheroistic characterisation that perpetually keeps in play the tensions inherent between appearance and reality (or fact and fiction). The final season foregrounds the resolution of the ambivalent relationship between Paul and Carrie, where their narrative opposition becomes harmonious agency in the finale. The *Homeland* aesthetic weaves their narrative journey as two people both beholden: him to rigid national bureaucracy and to the intelligence of his protégé in the field doing the hard work of securitisation and she to the homeland that would deny her loyalties and the ties that bind them. In jeopardy is nothing less than the paradox of judgment (Piper, 2004) entailed in the partial legibility (Berlant, 1997) of knowledge as always constructed and at odds with truth.

⁴⁴ The notion of harmony has been systematically considered in the musicology writings of Hugo Riemann (1849-1919). His harmonic function theory continues to act as the foundational topic in musical theory today. It is worth noting that the terms 'contrast chord' and 'harmonic dualism' are drawn from the complex system of his tonal theory in which he systematically considers linear shifts in progression as dissonance when movements are inverted and parallel (Rehding, 2003). Here, I transpose his conceptual models of dissonance and tonality to the analysis of television as an art form that shares many attributes with music and of which it is partially constituted.

In aesthetic terms, the duality proposed by Irish Parliamentarian and philosopher Edmund Burke (2015[1757])) recognises the beautiful and the sublime as the twin pillars of the perfection of taste. He held that ‘the objective foundations of beauty and sublimity turn out to be largely opposing: whereas the beautiful tends to the small, the smooth, the various, the delicate, the clear, and the bright, the sublime tends to the great, the uniform, the powerful, the obscure, and the somber’ (Shelly, 2014: 2.2). Moreover, from his argument that

whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (Burke, 2015: 33)

we can extrapolate that the ‘certain distance and certain modifications’ (Burke, 2015: 41) of the sublime are akin to the virtuality and affectations already structurally embedded within the televisual mode, which alters otherwise grossly unpleasant scenarios into thrilling experiences. This permits us to reflect on *Homeland* as a set of stylistic choices and practices *and* discursively contemplate the cultural milieu and technical practices it (re)presents. I argue that the fact that *Homeland* has sufficient affective power to engender reflexivity on American political division is a marker of its quality insofar as the recursive experience is a positive one (of relief being in the genre of political thriller).

We also see this notion of duality present in Kant’s aesthetic judgment of taste, where it is instantiated in his ‘universal subjectivity’. He defines aesthetic judgment as properly exercised when it is constituted as concomitant cognitive and affective epistemology of evaluation. It is illustrative of the contentious caring nature of national *sensus communis* whereby the individual making such judgments actively engages in an isolated reflection that,

while autonomous and based on his or her [JB59] feelings, nevertheless considers the perspective of others insofar as their claim must be communicable to them.

Thus, this aesthetic analysis of *Homeland* is an appreciation [of a [JB60] programme that arranges oppositional elements together so well that the programme is extremely pleasurable to watch. While *Homeland* falls into the genre of political thriller and draws on many of its antecedent production practices, *Homeland* is still a singular object of sorts that is composed of the new and the old, the borrowed and the invented, the weird and the conventional. As a thriller which sensationalises the institutional bureaucracy behind contemporary political intrigue and terrorism, *Homeland* formats the action of the story in both political and artistic terms while individual seasons feature and are defined by new international foci, characters and locations. Additionally, the unique characterisation of Carrie is meant to convey an example of how persons with mental disabilities or sensory impairments have adopted alternative modes of interpretation and understanding. However, despite the complex compromises of antiheroism and the justification of spying established in the programme, Carrie's first purpose is to entertain and affect, and she satisfies both with her melodramatic embodiment of the American imperative of choice as the actualisation of self-transformation (Elliot and Lamet, 2006).

Homeland takes some familiar fictional tropes and generic conventions and reimagines them in way that enables 'the free play' of the viewer's senses and faculties of cognition, actuating our aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, this free play of imagination, cognition and sensation, when conjoined with the other features of aesthetic judgement – freedom from quotidian concerns, disinterestedness, and 'the feeling of active discovery or understanding...make[s] the duality of aesthetic experience apparent: it is both attached and

participatory, free and controlled, cognitive and affective' (Smith, 2014: 33). The tautness of narrative suspense that makes *Homeland* so pleasurable to watch is a strange reflection of television's aesthetic duality: its capacity to tightly (metaphorically) pull viewers in while still medially (physically) keeping them at a distance.

Conclusion

A good thriller enables the viewer to feel the world from the inside perspective of the protagonist, taking us on an intensely felt narrative journey. *Homeland* sustains our attention by creating spaces of uncertainty and unpredictability in Carrie's characterisation (and Danes' convincingly hyperbolic portrayal of it) and how the series ends by reconciling the tension between desire and care as her sacrifice of what she wants to be better for another's well-being. The programme uses luminosity (or strictly speaking, gradations of greyness as varying degrees of darkness) to capitalise on and translate the themes of alienation, fragmentation, privacy, despair and disenchantment cinematographically. Moreover, *Homeland* uses a stylised model of interiority that restricts onscreen compositions and the narrative actions of spying (as a kind of epistemological discovery of unconcealment), to suggest the transgressing of boundaries and the possibilities of breaking free from the control of a powerful geopolitical system that can be as intrusive as it is oppressive but difficult, if not impossible, to resist.

Many of *Homeland*'s scenes and sequences suggest the notion of luminosity with respect to evoking interiority, often revolving around Carrie as she slips in and out of mental lucidity. By employing chiaroscuro as its melodramatic lighting strategy, *Homeland* strives

to create a thriller that is not only emotionally charged and visually intense, but also topical given its emphases on the current American political climate and mental instability (though this does not at all imply that being politically engaged equates with madness). In any case, *Homeland's* luminosity primarily remains in service to its successful appeal to the sensory expectations of the political thriller genre. It also shows that there is no totality that defines and governs reality in the absolutist manner, only perspectives, which often contrast sharply, nay, oppositionally (and sometimes violently), with one another.

CHAPTER 5 – LOOKING THROUGH THE FACETS OF SCANDAL

Beauty in things exists in the mind which contemplates them.

David Hume

Introduction

Distributed by Disney's broadcast television subsidiary ABC in 2012, *Scandal* revolves around topical political storylines, the melodramatic performance of its lead actress Kerry Washington, stunning cinematography, and a frenetic editing and pacing regime. *Scandal*'s critical popularity is, in the first instance, partially due to its creator Shonda Rhimes.⁴⁵ As the successful showrunner for the long-running hit medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present) for over a decade, Rhimes has a reputation for writing scripts which are 'fast paced, wonderfully well-crafted, and addict[ive] to watch' (Landau, 2016: 201).⁴⁶ In casually attributing such engrossing characteristics to *Scandal*, Landau glosses over how *Scandal* consistently deploys 'slick content' by intertwining topical storylines with high stylisation and intense dialogue, which is anticipated, given its production budget of \$7 million per episode and cast of consummate actors able to raise their emotive vocalisations to a fever pitch.

⁴⁵ The influence of social media on the popular reception of *Scandal*, though not fully discussed here, cannot be understated. Cast and crew alike, even Rhimes herself participated in increasing the visibility and stoking the fandom by live-tweeting during broadcasts, giving online tours of the set and providing subscribers and followers access to exclusive interviews and teasers of upcoming episode and cliff-hangers.

⁴⁶ Though its overall ranking ranged from 8th place (2014-15) to 53rd by the time the series ended, *Scandal* remains one of the most popular shows on social media, compelling viewers, cast, and crew alike to steadfastly tweet live during episode airings.

Indeed, much critical and popular attention has centred on the performance of Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope. Although shocking for the 21st century, it is noteworthy that she was cast as the first black actress in the lead role of a major American television network drama in nearly forty years (the last one being Teresa Graves in the short-lived series *Get Christie Love* (ABC, 1974)). Olivia Pope's brash tone, polished mien and determined (if mildly comical at times) gait comes across as refreshing, complex and plausible without falling prey to the 'angry black woman' stereotype that often plagues media representations of women of colour who exhibit otherwise impassioned behaviour onscreen. I will explore both the casting context and the nuances of Washington's performance with respect to genre and television production more generally later in this chapter.

My aim here is to explore how the 'sudden rush of emotions, the excitement, sense of suspense, apprehension, and exhilaration that drive[s] the narrative' (ITW, 2016)⁴⁷ in *Scandal* are achieved by the stimulation of autonomic responses to light and sound, framing energetic rapidity, the fabrication of emotional moral authority and the instillation of viewer doubt as central components in their representation of American public political broadcasts. Since successful (i.e., long-running) American television political thrillers 'absorb contemporary political themes and issues' (Coyne, 2008: 10) in US history and popular culture, it is not surprising that the story arcs for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 seasons of *Scandal* revolve around a presidential election. In fact, the show is inspired by former president George H.W. Bush's press aide Judy Smith, who runs a crisis management firm in Washington D.C. (and who is also an executive producer of the show).

⁴⁷ http://www.findmeanauthor.com/thriller_fiction_genre.htm

Similarly, *Scandal* is set in Washington D.C. and focuses on the machinations of former White House Director of Communications but current fixer Olivia Pope and her staff at her crisis management firm Olivia Pope and Associates (OPA), initially Steven Finch (Henry Ian Cusick), Quinn Perkins (Katie Lowes), Huck (Guillermo Diaz), Abbey Whelan (Darby Stanchfield) and Harrison Wright (Columbus Short); though Harrison and Steven are replaced in later seasons. Calling themselves ‘gladiators in suits’, they ‘handle’ the public relations crises of their politically elite and wealthy clients, usually involving the upper inner circle of the White House administration, primarily President Fitzgerald Grant III (Tony Goldwyn), his Chief of Staff Cyrus Beene (Jeff Perry), First Lady Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young) and US Attorney General David Rosen (Joshua Malina). Like Judy, all the members of the firm are lawyers, so their language is highly sophisticated, and they are acutely knowledgeable about the loopholes in the US legal system, which they readily circumvent for their clients.

The first section of this chapter will explore how the trope of spying and the cinematographic integration of photographic camera materiality lend themselves to a particular type of pleasurable experience that is both strangely sensuous and subversive in its application of luminosity. As demonstrated in the *Homeland*, spying offers the pleasure of access to secret information, the pleasure of ‘finding out’ and the pleasure of ‘knowing’. All these pleasures are widely acknowledged, and the spying in *Scandal* provides them by framing calculated exposure as its core conceit.

The second section will extend the analysis to show how the colour regime in *Scandal* not only reflects its commitment to diversity but also its innovative use of technological developments. The third section will focus on the key sensations in *Scandal*, emphasising the

aural aspects of *Scandal* and shows how these work in concert with light and colour to balance the effects of its rapid narrative pacing and editing regime with an unexpected twist of softness to an otherwise sharply crafted political thriller. The chapter will conclude by considering the significance of frisson in the seemingly contradictory sensation of negative hopefulness that ultimately characterises the series.

5.1 Framing Doubt: Exposure; (Camera) Effects and the Sensation of Spying

Every episode of *Scandal* begins with a triple exposure. The first and immediate exposure is that of a new public crisis or event that OPA must tackle. Only apparent to loyal viewer, the second is the slow and long exposure of the scandalous on-again-off-again private romantic relationship between our protagonist Olivia and the President, who is already quite publicly married to the First Lady. Simply viewing *Scandal* through the lens of realism, the affair ‘produces discomfort as it recirculates tired tropes about black female sexuality’ (Warner, 2015: 18) and asymmetrical power relations. However, Warner argues *Scandal* also affords a liberating and alternative melodramatic identity by integrating the excessive emotion and overwrought passion from ‘the paradigm of romantic fantasy’ (Warner, 2015: 20) into the agency and dramatic force of a political thriller. The third exposure skeumorphically imbeds ‘anticipation into its structure, setting up the audience to wait and see’ (Warner, 2015: 8), establishing anxiety as its core ‘expectant emotion’ (Ngai, 2005: 215).

The term exposure is not incidental. It purposefully draws attention to the importance of light in the perception of aesthetic compositions in most art forms, especially the visual arts. It also constitutes a unifying theme in *Scandal* and constructs the concept with the

programme's narrative and technical materiality. Prolonging and repeating the duration of exposure shapes our perceptual sensitivity with regards to how events and objects are lit therein *and* habituates how viewers feel about them since 'lighting seems able to bypass our usual cognitive perceptual screens—our rational faculty with its critical judgment—and affect us directly and immediately' (Zetl, 2016: 20).

In photography, exposure describes the amount of light per unit area (the image plane illuminance times the exposure time) reaching a photographic film or electronic image sensor, as determined by shutter speed, lens aperture and scene luminance and expressed as **lumens** (Peterson, 2010). *Scandal* integrates the existential materiality of the camera 'exposure triangle' (see Figure 6) at its core⁴⁸ to establish its aesthetic significance. The opening sequence is the first instance in which exposure occurs, framing the programme

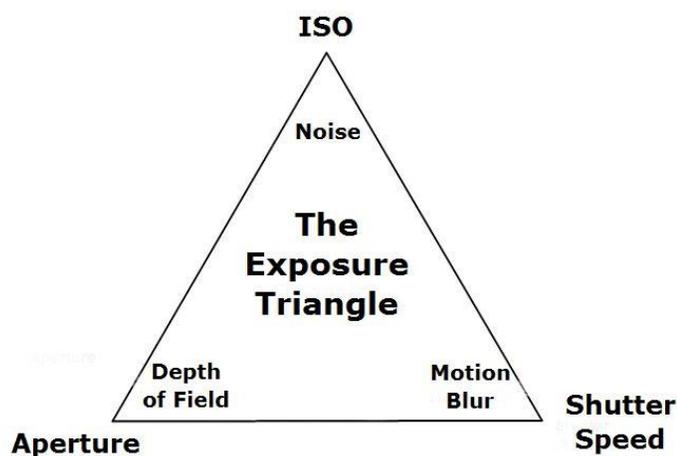


Figure 6 – basic schematic visually representing the relations between the operant components of a camera (image taken from Moneymaker, 2020)

⁴⁸ The digital noise that that accompanies scene luminance could conceivably include the sound of the shutter as it represents a feature normally invisible in pure photography. It is only when the act of photographing is transposed into an *audiovisual* media (e.g., film or television) that it even becomes evident and could therefore be regarded as undesirable.

within the likeness of a traditional photographic camera (skeuomorph). It does this in four ways, two visual and two sonic, increasing its audiovisual impact. It is important to note that exposure is implemented in post-production and is therefore properly part of its editing regime rather than being purely cinematographic; nevertheless, it evinces television as an ‘art of many media’ (Cardwell, 2014: 13).

5.1.1 Skeuomorphic Camera Materiality

First, exposure is achieved via the flash. In traditional cameras, a flash typically functions to illuminate objects. Correspondingly, in *Scandal* the flash is used to highlight the sequence in which it occurs. That they are also placed about the temporal borders of episodes – its acts as divided by commercial breaks – suggests that they function not only as visual markers for the diegetic cliff-hangers but also as a flashy temporal organisation. In this way, the screen image becomes more than just a representation of a subject. It is also a representation of its creator’s relationship with the subject, as well as the viewer’s own understanding of the screen image and its place within the narrative.

Second, is the adjustment of the camera aperture. Adjusting the aperture of a standard camera can produce what experienced photographers call *blur* (Peterson, 2010). In still photography, this is achieved by opening or closing the aperture (or, alternatively, by increasing or decreasing its size). It is closely related to but ontologically distinct from the depth of field or background blur. In *Scandal*, the screen blur is simulated with greyscale filters. That is, its effect is the result of changing the degree of transparency in a shot with opacity layer masques. The screen composition varies widely: sometimes they are facial

close-ups and other times they are extremely wide landscape establishing shots. An ASL analysis⁴⁹ of this sequence from the pilot episode shows it is composed of 16 frames:

1. black	9. grey translucent 50%
2. grey opaque	10. grey translucent 25%
3. grey translucent 75%	11. transparent
4. grey translucent 50%	12. grey translucent 50%
5. grey translucent 25%	13. transparent
6. transparent	14. transparent
7. transparent	15. transparent
8. transparent	16. grey translucent 50%

Table 1 - Average shot length analysis of *Scandal*'s first exposure (S1E1)

The selective greyness and transparency that characterises exposure begins to show how *Scandal* deals with its characters and subject matter – reflecting an ethical ambiguity about their storyworld and the work they do. As an innovation on the trope of a ‘moral grey area’, it casts doubt as greyness. Since the shots are also grey, *Scandal* suggests that characters are rarely fully good or evil, that their actions can be both right or wrong, and that the evaluation of things do not fall neatly into black and white (morally speaking). It also begins to hint at the inherent instability of the show’s titular premise and the viewer’s largely cynical pleasure in response to increasingly spurious situations in that certain scenes must be clearly flashed for closer inspection.

⁴⁹ Average Shot Length (ASL) analysis is a descriptive tool initially proposed by Barry Salt. David Bordwell uses it in his *Cinematics* website to look at the ‘patterns in a film’s editing scheme, allowing us to see at a glance regularities and variations at several levels (the sequence, the section, the entire film).’ (n.d)

Third, is the sound of the camera shutter. A camera shutter is a device that allows light to pass for a determined period, exposing photographic film or a light-sensitive electronic sensor to light to capture a permanent image of a visual field. A shutter can also be used to allow pulses of light to pass outwards, as seen in a movie projector or a signal lamp (Peterson, 2010). In *Scandal*, the shutter sound occurs in concert with the two visual cues to focus viewer attention to the screen. It both amplifies and synchronises the distal senses of sight and sound, reinforcing their affectivity.

Fourth, is the shutter speed (also defined as exposure time). Slow speeds indicate one of two things – that it is quite dark, and one needs to allow more light into the camera or that one wants to introduce some blur into the photo (Peterson, 2010). This has the effect of ‘capturing’ motion. Fast speeds, counterintuitively, freeze movement. The high frequency of the shutter speed in exposure works to set the tempo or pace of the show by creating excitement and starts to gesture towards the elevation of that other art – music – in *Scandal*.

Thus, the audiovisual flash in *Scandal* has several functions. It functions as flashback, as photos taken, as commercial break marker, as surveillance, as pressure released and simply as a flash. It occurs as a double since it is always accompanied by the flashing sound of a camera shutter, the flash transcends its diegetic boundaries by interpolating between the narrative and us affectively (as viewers).

5.1.2 Cinematographic Motion: Reflection and Refraction

Since *Scandal* introduces us to exposure in the pilot and uses it regularly to punctuate episodes, our attention to camera movement is already schematically embedded as a stylistic flourish when it appears cinematographically as *bevellation*, one of *Scandal*'s signature visual effects (see Figure 7). Bevellation is formally achieved with a camera on a dolly that pans past transparent and reflective objects such as windowpanes or glass doors before cutting to oblique or side close-up shots. It is executed when the audience is being made aware of something the public in the show are not aware of. It exemplifies a style of shooting in which the object is often not shot full-on. As Steve Lawes, the director of cinematography, relates: 'Paul [Maguire, the director of *Scandal*] and I both like the idea of shooting through frames and finding people through things. It's another example of what you do in real life. You very rarely have this wonderful straight view of people' (Watts, 2014: 18).



Figure 7 – Olivia strategising at OPA (and illustrating bevellation) (S7E11)

This style of filming is not entirely unusual, but an innovation on a cinematographic convention frequently used in television crime shows and political dramas (e.g., *The West Wing*, *NYPD Blue*) or horror and mystery films to convey a viewer's privileged access to knowledge. In *Scandal*, bevellation appears when the screen event is generally of a confidential, clandestine or covert nature. It is only used when the setting is familiar, narratively speaking, such as in the private rooms of the White House, a character's home, or someplace else where privacy is expected. It does not occur in overtly secret locations or in public places. In this sense we are being made to feel a rippling voyeuristic pleasure, as if we ourselves are getting away with spying on the action in the scene. In flashbacks, *Scandal's* overlapping planes of screen transparency simulate the strange sensation of looking through glass or into a mirror, but it also beautifully blurs the onscreen composition by diffusing light and softening its texture.

A strange extension of the bevellation is the *refractive double*. This effect is achieved using close-up or medium close-up camera shots of the figure – usually Olivia but not always – in a distorted refraction about a reflective surface. This visual fragmentation positions the object, or rather, our perception of the object as unstable. This doubling is contrived to be external in source but internal in orientation. That is, the refraction destabilises our perception of Olivia and recasts her as a Janus-faced figure. Olivia is presented as a peculiar double affection in which her double appears as if a contemplative or pensive character in a dream, using visual counterpoint to represent the human capacity for change upon reflection.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Kant distinguishes the form of experience, which is determined by the subject's mind, from the matter of experience, which is determined by how the subject is causally affected by objects. Applying his idiosyncratic terminology to television is metaphorical; the 'phenomenal' meaning of the refracted double of the figure within in the narrative, which constitutes the affectual televisual

5.1.2.1 Facing the Facts: Contrast, Balance and Colour Matters

Even though *Scandal* devotes so much imaginative technical energy to the orchestration of light in its aesthetic calculations, an exploration of its colour regime reveals an even stronger appeal to the visual senses. Zettl notes that, as a chromatic extension of the field of light, colour in audiovisual production serves three principle functions: informational, compositional and expressive (2016: 70-74). In *Scandal*, colour is also a narrative motif and uses these functional principles to exude a durably dual sensation of disbelief and desire. The programme also excels ‘at translating colors into color energies and then bringing the various energies into either balance or purposeful conflict’ (Zettl, 2016: 73) by weaving the subjective immediacy of colour into conventional shades contrasting the antagonism and harmony, heartache and hope, ugliness and beauty. When foregrounded



Figure 8 – Olivia pondering in her office (and illustrating refractive double) (S1E3)

experience, is different from the ‘nouemal’ refraction, which is merely a physical change in the direction of waves as they change mediums.



Figure 9 – Olivia approaching Fitz in the Oval Office (S1E2)



Figure 10 – Olivia drinking wine in her kitchen (S1E5)

against the colour scheme in *Scandal*, the warm hues of Pope's skin demonstrate a careful and coherent chromatic planning that is pleasing to eye without feeling forced. In any case, whether Olivia is drinking wine in her kitchen, delivering a press conference before reporters, confronting the President in the Oval Office or devising the next move in her office, the colour pattern is remarkably consistent.

In the above stills (Figure 8-Figure 10), this consistency is apparent when looking at Olivia in medium and medium close-up shots. *Scandal's* general spectrum (Figure 11) is exemplary of the way in which it uses the colour palate as a template to suffuse a consistent mood into the visual field of the show. What is most evident is that the abundance of neutral



Figure 11 – *Scandal's* general colour palette

and warm hues is distinctive because they are muted in tone and somewhat cloudy, reminiscent of a dream. This is not purely a matter of colour-grading in post-production but the deliberate design of a close collaboration between the director of photography (Oliver Bokelberg), production designer (Corey Kaplan) and costume designer (Lyn Elizabeth Paolo) to complement the colour of Washington's skin. This selective organisation of colour, and its dominance in both positive and negative image compositions indicate *Scandal* is directing our attention to the varied emotive aspects of these colours.

The way in which we perceive colour (and, consequently, its visceral effect on us) is highly dependent on its surrounding colours (Metallinos, 2013) or compositional contrast. *Scandal* indoor scenes are staged primarily in softened and muted hues of brown, grey and blue. Pure white appears as light or as an elongating framing structure (i.e., doors).

Washington's skin is a combination of browns and pinks, and greys when in shadow. Photographically, having such similar colours in both the foreground object and the background *mise en scène* often renders the various parts of the visual field difficult to differentiate (Peterson, 2010).

However, in *Scandal* this is purposeful because highlighting her 'in front of a black or dark-blue background could result in a contrast that exceeds the technical capabilities of the video camera, thereby either overexposing the light areas or making the shadows uniformly dark and dense' (Zettl, 2016: 63). Instead, Washington's dark voluminous tresses permanently distinguish her face from the hues surrounding her and prevent a monochromatism that might otherwise feel washed out. This chromatic uniformity saturates *Scandal's* field of view with warmth. Vibrant greens and blues are reserved for still-life objects such as fruit or foliage, and these are often heavily shadowed or out of focus. This doubling of colour compounds the experience of the refractive double and becomes a matter of seeing one thing twice.

5.1.2.2 The ARRI ALEXA

Having a camera that can beautifully render various shades of skin is clearly of great concern to *Scandal's* director of cinematography Oliver Bokelberg. He explains that

visually, it's most important for the audience to buy into our truth, to believe everything they see. I just like the look of the ALEXA. Our cast is diverse, and the ALEXA handles all our skin colors beautifully. To my eyes, there is no other camera that can handle this as well. There's a certain softness to it, almost an organic grain structure. I feel it's the closest I can get to a film look (Heuring, 2013: 3).

This is important to know because initially colour balance (in the ‘film look’ Bokelberg refers to) was determined by the chemicals used in film processing and the ratio of those chemicals (Kuhn and Westerwell, 2012). However, as the early actors, film processors and production crew were uniformly white, these emulsions were developed and calibrated in terms of an assumed whiteness of subject as the dominant colour criterion: the ‘Shirley’ card (Roth, 2009). This pale skin bias made it difficult to balance different skin tones in the same shot and had over time evolved into an institutional technical discrimination in the visual industries (photography, film, television, etc.) against people with darker skin ‘whose embodied imagery would have benefited from a more sensitive chemical emulsion [to the yellows, reds, and browns of darker skin] in the case of still photography and a more dynamic range in the case of digital technology’ (Roth, 2009: 116).

However, the expensive ARRI ALEXA range (including its successors, ALEXA PLUS, ALEXA 65, SXT W, MINI and AMIRA)⁵¹ has become the motion picture cameras of choice for cinematographers that have an ensemble cast with different skin tones and want to render these as beautifully as possible, especially on big budget films and television series. This is because the ARRI ALEXA has a high dynamic range (HDR) between 14-15 stops (film has around 15 stops of dynamic range with far less contrast capabilities) and because its proprietary colour science does more than simply reproduce colour and skin tones naturally but individually calibrates them in relation to others in the visual field. ARRI managing director Frank Kraus argues that ‘a lot of design consideration

⁵¹ It can cost upwards of €10,000 a week to rent an ARRI ALEXA kit (including insurance, transport and ancillary equipment such as lenses, monitors, chargers, etc.) in addition to hiring a cameraman (and their assistant) who is familiar with operating the camera rigs (CameraImage, 2019) though the price varies due to variables of contract, duration of rental, whether they are direct (from ARRI) or and third-party rentals, and professional contacts.

has gone into how the Alexa 65 represents human faces. It was important to make faces look pleasing, whether young or old. They did not want the ultra-high resolution of the camera to make faces look harsh or unnatural' (Allard, 2015: 3).

In *Homeland* and *Scandal*, the duskiess that permeates the screen is attributable to the ARRI ALEXA and post-production colour grading.⁵² The colour science of the digital camera gives the images an exceedingly high quality with fine, softened textures and high exposure. Magenta in the image is virtually eliminated, there is a slight cyan tint and multiple skin tones are individually calibrated. Since ARRI delivers by default a flatter image in midtones and highlights, saturation is then selectively added to add volume and provide depth; but it is gentle and makes the shots look more film-like. Of course, wider shots take longer to process, and darker shots are easier given the grey wash of the camera. The resulting look gives us deep blacks that are not overly crushed, sensibly rich colour that is coordinated with the colourist (sometimes called colour-graders or colour correctors), set director, costume director and lead cinematographer (or the director of photography (DP)).

Since the expression of contrast is determined by colour balance, *Scandal* uses the latter to maximum effect, forming part of its signature style. As an aesthetic concept, contrast is comprehended as the difference between compositional elements. Technically speaking, contrast is achieved by adding or subtracting luminance from the primary object against other objects within the same visual field (Peterson, 2010). In *Scandal*, contrast is achieved by

⁵² *Homeland* cinematographer Davin Klein states 'from season 3, it is till primarily an Alexa show, but added a Red Epic, Canon 1DC and Canon 5D. The Alexas are our A and B cameras and we'll bring the Epic out for its size, weight and as a C camera body whenever we need it. I think the Alexa and Epic cut together really well. The Canon 1DC and 5D have mainly been used for their size and weight as well because you can literally rig those cameras anywhere. They've been matching the Alexa and Epic footage better than I'd initially thought they would. All of these digital cameras look different, but if you find the right way to use them together it's pretty seamless' (Creative Cow, n.d.)

varying the image density as shades of grey to produce distinct but texturally softened images. By converting differences in exposure into differences of density, *Scandal* smooths out the lines and creates a soft matte finish. Since the dynamic range of the ALEXA camera is so high (practically 14 stops), it mimics film (about 15 stops) and approaches the human eye (approximately 20 stops). Of course, in the real world we rarely see true black as it appears on television, but rather gradations of shadow and shade about an object's local colour. However, deliberately shooting scenes containing higher incidences of darker objects and higher incidences of reflectivity as *Scandal* does, necessitates an HDR camera.

It is possible to use the exposure pattern of *Scandal* to fully demonstrate its contrast and colour characteristics with the ALEXA. In the visual industries, the exposure system is based on the number 2. That is, when we halve or double the camera settings, we make a one stop change in exposure (CameraImage, 2019).

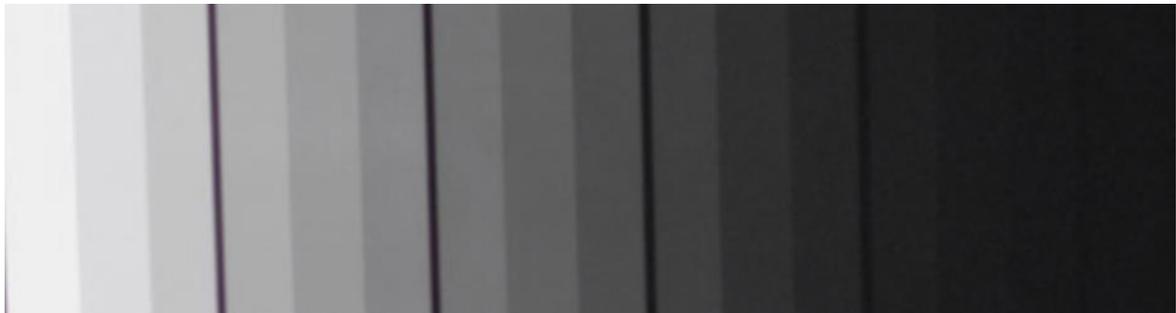


Figure 12 – ARRI ALEXA dynamic stop range

Scandal has an exposure scale of 120 that is relative to the middle grey area (which is assigned a value of 1) with a 2:1 ratio or 50% contrast. Since saturation is locked after .4 on the ALEXA and only luminance increases, *Scandal* effectively can increase or decrease the range of contrast in scenes and between subjects within scenes without sacrificing clarity or losing focus and allows viewers to register contrasting shades of exposure as part of its expressive vocabulary.

5.1.3 Balancing the Colour Scheme

The balancing of cool and neutral background with grey midtones accentuated with warm, high-energy and/or reflective objects in the foreground is an overture to the aesthetic principle of harmony. As is evident from the casting choices from the first season, *Scandal* strives to create a show that is as inclusive as it is diverse. Undoubtedly owing to her being a black woman, creator Rhimes' should still be given credit for her role in breaking with the white-washed and male overrepresentation in the film and television industries. This is no small feat in an industry where whiteness, youth and men dominate and in which producers and studios still stubbornly cling to the myth that audiences prefer to watch shows with white actors.

Scandal maintained a consistent colour scheme throughout its first several seasons. Exploring these colours, we can see they add another dimension to the narrative that would otherwise be lost. Although not strictly monochromatic, the similarity in hues between foreground and background again contributes to its immediate apperception. Because television and film occur as moving images, their symbolic use of colour needs be sensed instantaneously. Using a neutral and desaturated warm palette produces a contradictory effect on perception and therefore has a strange effect on viewers. In the first instance, it creates an inviting visual flow that blends different scenes together, so they have a uniform look that is soothing to the eye. It also tends to provide a cohesive look to scenes by using contrasting hues to attract attention and put greater focus on the different elements of the mise en scène.

The desaturated colours in *Scandal* allow the high-energy distribution to fall on the audio component or other objects in the foreground without being distracted by minor

elements in the *mise en scène*. Additionally, the abundance of greys lends itself seamlessly to the editing regime which already uses grey as the unit of exposure. This aids the continuity for the viewer by imbuing the text with a mysterious mood. The use of low-energy colours is also a nod to the technological advancements of screens themselves. Since modern high-definition television and computer monitors tend to have highly saturated displays, watching a thriller with a high-energy colour palette would make the scene overly vivid for the viewer. This has the undesirable effect of making one aware that one is watching a show. The artifice of the programme begins to break and decreases the intended emotional engagement with screen events, making 'internal events, or inscapes, too external, luring the viewer into looking at rather than into the event' (Zettl, 2016: 75). By adjusting for this, *Scandal* convincingly communicates inscapes far more effectively and transparently.

Furthermore, neutral colour, and what in painting is referred to as transparency, belong primarily to shade. *Scandal* arranges both to attribute certain values to the objects in the screen events we see. These objects are designed to relate directly to their status as artefacts of authority and control, and work at first to legitimise the political status quo and then to gradually dismantle it. Because neutral colours are, by tautology, neutral, to paint its fictive world in such tones is to convey the common sense that the American political system, particularly the Republican Party, is one whose morally conservative façade conceals a scandalous underbelly that operates mostly in the shadows in the preservation of its own interests rather than being for the benefit of the general American populace. That *Scandal* is set amongst the backdrop of the neoclassical architecture of the American capital's government buildings, gleaming even into the night, belies the classical conservatism and intransigence of the political process in the United States.

5.1.4 Colour Symbolism in Costuming

Another powerful use of colour employed in *Scandal* is its symbolic use of white. Traditionally, white is often framed as good, pure, protective, if sometimes cold (Misek, 2010). When she is wearing white, especially ‘The White Hat’, *Scandal* is symbolically gesturing to her moral interiority as good, just or righteous; a convention appropriated from US Western genre films (Agnew, 2012). While Pope’s firm specialises in ‘fixing’ the public crisis of whomsoever can pay their excessive client fee, they cannot always be comprehended morally right but more ambiguously as they also have clients who are objectively bad (i.e., kidnappers, murderers, fraudsters, etc.), raising extratextual questions about capitalism as much as it internally expresses the characters’ moral alignments.

However, they do not take cases solely based on one’s ability to pay (though this is generally a prerequisite to the client approaching the firm in the first place), but rather the overriding determinant stems from episode one wherein Pope expositis her staff policy is to ‘always trust your gut.’ In these instances, they will take on a client whom others consider to be unscrupulous, lying or simply wrong but whom they feel is worthy because their intuition is guiding them. When Olivia goes on a crusade to defend the defenceless or to expose a particular person who appears upstanding, she will don white to sartorially show that she feels she is doing the right and moral thing, even if her methods are ethically ambiguous.

In the practice of this intuition, Olivia is making the claim that her gut feelings are rarely wrong. To support this in cases where the viewer might question her methods or actions, Olivia conspicuously wears white which sharply contrasts with her normally neutral, beige or grey attire. In a particularly vexing situation, an over-the-top, white wide-brimmed



Figure 13 – Olivia contemplating her next move in ‘The White Hat’ (S2E22)

fedora melodramatically frames her face and pulls viewers’ eyes directly to the emotional struggle on her face makes the point (see Figure 13).

Additionally, Olivia’s carefully coloured and tailored wardrobe offers a rich symbolism of her frame of mind with respect to the narrative. The deep dark blue that Olivia wears in season four is Proenza navy, a tone that is virtually absent on *Scandal* and sartorial proof that Olivia is grappling with her emotions. Moreover, Olivia does not simply wear all black, white or neutral attire as she did in season three; these are sartorial clues of her interiority, whether she is literally in the dark, on a crusade or not personally invested. When, from season five onwards, her attire becomes redder, symbolising her increasing appetite for power and (in the case of her red stilettos) bloodlust, literally showing us her willingness to ‘step in it’.

Attentive viewers will notice that the costuming on the show carries a lot of weight. When Olivia is suffering from PTSD after her kidnapping and realises the misguided ‘error’ of her ways – by leaving President Grant and taking back control of her life (or losing control of her composure, depending on your perspective) – her outfits burst with colour and brightness. Forgoing the greys and beige, in a sense, establishes both a narrative and character shift whereby she begins to reject the conservative system that she has worked so hard to maintain and succeed within. Rather than concealing her motives and subduing her more transgressive behaviour behind the masterful manipulation of facts, Olivia finally begins to expose the violence that is obscured by the cold indifference and often seedy power plays of the moneyed and political elite.

It all dovetails beautifully when Olivia discovers that the Vice President, a seemingly docile and effete conservative, orchestrated her kidnapping, hoping to trigger a war and President Grant’s downfall. Olivia’s heavy greyish-white coat of conservatism begins gradually to loosen as she learns the truth, revealing a blood red blouse underneath. This red blouse is not accidental but foreshadowing. Failing to persuade the Vice President to publicly come clean about his deeds, Olivia flies into a rage and murders him, splattering his bright red blood everywhere and staining her face.

Here it becomes clear that Olivia is no longer in denial about the moral pretension of her conservative whiteness. From this pivotal moment in the middle of the fifth season, Olivia literally becomes a burning and bloody beacon of hope. Gone are the muted shades meant to lull the senses. The slow burn that was Olivia coming into her own in the first four seasons is now fully lit whether she is on fire (orange) or dressed to kill (red). Although she does not wear these colours exclusively in later seasons, for she must still navigate the corridors of

power in conservative colours to blend in, attention to costuming forces us to consider what such a drastic chromatic shift is narratively expressing.



Figure 14 – Olivia murdering Vice President Nichol's (S5E17)



Figure 15 – S5E3 promo showing Olivia has abandoned her conservative clothing (ABC, 2015)



Figure 16 – Olivia disapproving outside her apartment (S5E10)

5.2 Narrative Exposure and the Sense of Community

Scandal also uses spying as generic trope, taking on a more sinister and uncomfortable aspect when it is deployed as surveillance by OPA because, as a business model, Olivia and her colleagues are more concerned with their client's interest and personal profit rather than protecting the populace. Across the seasons and stakeouts, cameras are concealed in multiple locations exposing different characters for a variety of reasons. Often the frames are themselves doubled or tripled so that we are looking at multiple FUIs, not including our respective viewing screens. Even when we are witness to the setting up of this exposure and understand its narrative justification, it is extremely unsettling. To achieve this aesthetic *Scandal* plays with subjective and objective camera placement, usually with two cameras, as using two (and sometimes three cameras) allows them to move beyond standard

scenic coverage with a larger depth of field and multiple reaction shots that are performance-orientated.

At the narrative level, cameras and FUIs are also a motif running throughout. Here the emphasis on necessity is most pronounced, as they are ubiquitous in contemporary American (i.e., Western) society in the form of smartphone and computer monitors. In *Scandal* smartphones are often used by OPA associates to capture photographic evidence (see Figure 17). They also appear in virtually every episode as a realist representation of character communication or en masse during press conferences.



Figure 17 – Olivia and OPA gladiators photographing their blood-splattered new client (S1E1)

During these latter screen events, the blurring of boundaries is at its highest. They exhibit ‘the media’ as the collection of journalists and other powerful political players overwhelming the screen with multiple flashes. This is due to the subjective camera (or POV) setup where the screen acts as the viewpoint of Olivia as she gives public statements on behalf

of her clients; we are meant to be seeing what she sees. In the opposite staging, viewers assume a polar interpolation, from the perspective of the press^[JB63], acting as a type of direct address when Olivia speaks, fully facing the screen.

Camera exposure also narratively occurs immediately after crime scenes, again pursuant to documenting objects or persons for evidence. Here it is difficult to distinguish between the use of the flash in the diegesis and its editing form as they overlap and have the same sonic structure. This double duty again mixes senses and raises the degree of affective ambiguity. Such framing replicates the sensation of phenomenologically being present, assimilating the event as a dispositive abstraction of realist experiential simulation of affective camera and (character) alignment.

5.2.1 Morality, Politics and Twitter

Whatever moral conflict exists between Olivia and President Grant over their affair, or those of the other regular characters with respect to their actions, is a minor concern, despite all Olivia's exhortations of 'wearing the White Hat'. What matters most is how she feels in the moment; if her gut is telling her to act a certain way, then Olivia acts accordingly. This convergence of individuality, agency, emotion, and profit in the maintenance of political power is a theme that *Scandal* extracts quite explicitly from the so-called 'conservative' values of the US Republican Party. If one is compelled to look past the inchoate politicisation of masks during the covid-19 pandemic into a debate on individual freedom, then one needs look no further than the hypocritical justification of a Supreme Court confirmation pushed through by the Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Despite blocking President Obama's nomination during his last year in office because McConnell wanted to 'give the people a voice in the filling of this vacancy' (Silverstein, 2020) by waiting until the new president entered office, he felt no such compunction in exploiting the death of Ruth Bader-Ginsburg to confirm conservative Amy Barrett to the court before the 2020 Presidential election. Such events underline Rhimes' creative vision. In an interview she asserts 'it's always been my contention that the Oval Office, in our show, was a place that corrupted anybody who came near it and the closer you came, the more corrupt it made you and the more damaged it made you' (Goldberg, 2018: 7).

Consider the story arc of season one, where it is revealed Olivia and her conspirators (Mellie, Cyrus, Supreme Court Justice Verna Thornton (Debra Mooney) and financier Hollis Doyle (Gregg Henrey) stole the election for President Grant with rigged voting machines. In seasons six and seven the election of Mellie as president is also undermined by unfounded accusations by her own vice president Cyrus so that he could assume the presidency. The plot presages how several southern states sought to disenfranchise millions of voters by overturning the results of the 2020 Presidential election to keep Trump in power by claiming states' laws (only those in which he lost) were illegal. This was despite Republican themselves having passed the laws and several of the statutes for years, ultimately leading to the assault on the Capital after Trump's refusal to concede.

In melodramatic fashion, *Scandal's* interventions are of a more murderous nature. For example, former First Lady Mellie becomes the default president after divorcing the sitting President Grant while the Democratic nominee's wife Luna Vargas orders the assassination of the president-elect Frankie Vargas (Ricardo Antonio Chavira), her husband. In comparison to the real world, that Biden merely won the popular vote and the electoral college by utilising

mail-in voting provisions seems almost humdrum. In both fictional and real political narratives, this double standard highlights the hypocritical obsession with arbitrary opposition at the heart of the US political system.

The sociocultural shifts behind political movements like *MeToo* and *Black Lives Matter* are also used as contextual story arcs in *Scandal*. Several episodes deal with race-baiting, rape and sexual assault during the series run while Olivia's father embodies a social critique of systemic racism in the US, periodically chastising Olivia with the angry diatribe 'you have to be twice as good to get half as much', in explicit (and appropriate) connotations of the US's systemic racism and misogyny. The crossover episodes of *Scandal* (season seven, episode twelve) with *How to Get Away With Murder* (season four, episode thirteen) pointedly does the same, as Olivia and Analise Keating fight to bring a class action case about the mass incarceration of black people before the Supreme Court, ultimately arguing that 'race is always a factor' in the US criminal justice system.

Here we can see how *Scandal* starts to comment on the appearance and exercise of authority, using Olivia as a screen upon which to project attitudes about the fragile political milieu in America upon which *Scandal* depends to coordinate its plotlines. It shows how she 'handles' a crisis by greying the facts – manipulating public discourse and details in the face of being threatened with multiple exposure attempts (she calls it controlling or setting the narrative). Olivia carries much of the performative weight, although she shares this task with First Lady Mellie, Cyrus and her father Eli 'Rowan' Pope (Joe Morton) during melodramatic dialogue scenes. These performances are electric; as the wide undulating intonations of their shouting outbursts border on the hysterical, overwhelming our autonomic responses to them as viscerally felt on the skin as much as heard through the ears.

These explosive verbal jousting scenes are reserved for melodramatic confrontations between two characters and cliff-hangers,⁵³ a convention common in the soap opera genre. The camera shots switch between short close-ups, cutting quickly to show shifting emotional states, especially surprise. This has the effect of registering exposure by sublimating its affective saliency. The frequency and amplitude of their occurrences show *Scandal* is not meant to be subtle.

Instead, stretched over seven seasons, constantly raising the narrative stakes every year, *Scandal*'s plot points become increasingly more extreme, partly due to the American political context of its production and partly due to the thrilling mandate of its genre. Its slick staging stuns the eyes with bright flashes while the screaming and shouting startles the ears, its excess overwhelms our visual and auditory sense, themselves already strained by its speedy tempo of Twitter tweets, retweets updates and bathroom breaks. Besides the commercial cliff-hangers and schematic serialisation, *Scandal*'s subsumption of males under 'strong female' agency is also appropriated from soap opera, rendering men as manipulatable playthings in a romantic fantasy running contrary to the normative gendered representation in political thrillers.

Rather than using the centripetal fragmentation deployed in *Homeland*, *Scandal* emphasises verticality⁵⁴ in the narrative sense. Strangely, while *Scandal*'s frequent storylines

⁵³ There is running gag with OPA about being their being 'gladiators in suits'. Once you join OPA, you commit to the firm and protect each other, following the other gladiators over the cliff. The characters intermittently espouse at pitch and length about going over a cliff due to one transgression or another, and this? usually crescendos just before a narrative cliff-hanger paused by the commercial break.

⁵⁴ Verticality is design concept and metaphor that influences perception with a predominance of lines and shapes and other figures arranged perpendicular to the horizon plane, unconsciously conveying connotations of power, morality and emotional valences (Cian, 2015). This is applied in the narrative

are framed as political crises threatening ‘The Republic’ instead of the nation,⁵⁵ OPA interminably undermine elections through or assault, bribery, coercion, media manipulation or simply murder^[JB65]. Yet the persistence of spying on the show in the form of bugs, computer hacking, hidden cameras, secretive photography, eavesdropping or good, old-fashioned stalking proffers these as wholly unproblematic. Though it makes explicit overtures to transparency, rights to privacy, and the integrity and autonomy of the press, episodes in fact undo each of these: no one involved is ever really held to account, not even in the court of public opinion for long, so Olivia and her compatriots are never really exposed. This suggests that *Scandal* is complicit in, or at least draws from, the inuring of viewers to the reality of being covertly observed and that spying and being spied on is rapidly becoming a normal part of everyday life, specifically in American society.⁵⁶

Scandal taps into the lived somaesthetics of spying by capitalising on fandom and harking back to Raymond William’s ‘liveness’ of television. Related to Mittel’s ‘forensic fandom’, *Scandal* fans, cast and crew propelled the programme into the popular stratosphere by engaging with viewers via Twitter while the show was being broadcast live, making viewers commentary central to its materiality. A recent Pew poll indicates that most Twitter

with characters constantly feeling low, being in ‘high spirits, picking themselves ‘up’ fall, having ‘high-level’ discussions and trying increase their power and prestige by ascending to the office of the Presidency, the ‘highest’ public position of power in the US government.

⁵⁵ A republic is a form of government where the power a) rests with the people, b) is exercised through representative government, and c) has an elected head of state. The nation, which Carrie claims to be protecting in *Homeland*, is the totality of its citizens. Olivia is more focused on maintaining the levers of power rather protecting the well-being of the general populace.

⁵⁶ In the United Kingdom, some 5 million closed-circuit television cameras were in operation in both public and private locations as of 2019, or one camera for every 11 persons (AIT News Desk, 2019). In the US, the situation is predictably worse with 50 million CCTV camera. Yet, both countries pale in comparison to the surveillance state China which has installed more than 200 million cameras across the country (Ni and Wang, 2020). Regardless, the paranoia effected by spying is a genuine if not ignorantly compliant, more so when the monitoring of internet activity by search engines like Google and mobile phone applications is factored in.

users are black females in the 18-25 demographic (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019) and Nielsen figures showing that ‘*Scandal* [was] the highest rated scripted drama among African-Americans’ (Vega, 2013) at the time, Warner (2015) argues that *Scandal* culturally functions as an icon of black female fantasy of desire, focusing less on the colour of their skin and more on their agency as viewers pleased by vivid characterisations.

Indeed, *Scandal* owes a significant portion of its popularity to its social media and marketing strategy that makes viewers feel that they are part of the programme as they interact live with far flung friends and family, cast and crew members along with other viewers. At its peak, there were thirty-six official accounts and innumerable hashtags that raised the profile of interactive television in what has been termed ‘appointment television’, or television programmes people make a conscious decision to watch at the time of their original broadcast (Rohrs, 2005).

This community of shared experience enhances the feeling of being involved and makes them excited in anticipation of the next episode^[JB66]. Moreover, the community of active black viewers using Twitter as a platform of the ‘Black feminist epistemology’ espoused by Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) where they ‘create and maintain a sphere of freedom for Black women's social and political discourse’ (Liston, 2017: 72) to express their shared experiences in an ongoing dialogue with fellow fans and supportive allies. In its simultaneous Twitter usage, *Scandal* rewards viewers with ‘an experience of actual liveness through a discourse of discernment that privileges certain moments and sequences over others’ (Hanson, 2008: 57) rather than merely having an ideology of liveness (Feuer, 1983).

According to Twitter global partnership solutions leader Lara Cohen, this made ‘the audience feel heard — so [that] responding, replying to certain fans on Twitter or reTweeting [sic] fans or quote-Tweeting fans’ (Turchiano, 2018: par. 12) shows the death of television (predicted by journalists in articles such as ‘The Death of Television’ (Penenberg, 2005) or the industry report ‘The End of Television as We Know It’ (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2006) is rather a transformation of the medium into a kind of ‘community media’ (Hardenbergh, 2010: 170). However, instead of being restricted to geography, the shared televisual experience binds viewers, cast and crew into virtually ‘interacting in real-time as the thrills of the storyline play out on-screen’ (Turchiano, 2018: par. 11).

This synchronicity is a ‘radical alteration of the forms of our culture’s previous temporal and spatial consciousness and our bodily sense of “presence” to the world, to ourselves and to others’ (Sobchack, 2016: 89). *Scandal*’s instantiation of change is premised on Rhimes’ normalisation of diversity and declining Nielsen numbers necessitating novel marketing strategies to generate enough ‘buzz’ to justify the advertising and product placement fees charged by ABC and ShondaLand (Kallsen, 2014). Lotz (2014) notes that other ‘novel’ configurations will emerge as producers seeks to mitigate modes of viewing that are ‘increasingly complicated, deliberate and individualized’ (2014: 3) by reorganising their business practices to capitalise on viewer’s exercise of choice.

5.2.2 Contextualising Colour

As alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, one of the most arresting features about *Scandal* is the historical context of its casting. Rejecting the systemic discrimination that purports alleged bankability should trump any kind of minority casting and storylines that

might alienate viewers, the programme has been singled out for ‘making television history’ (Vega, 2013), but *Scandal* is not alone. Rhimes capitalised on the success of *Scandal* and *Grey’s Anatomy* to create *How to Get Away with Murder* (2015, ABC)⁵⁷ so that the entire Thursday night ABC prime-time line-up consisted of Rhimes’ programmes, rebranding their long-running prime-time line-up from ‘TGIT’ (Thank God It’s Thursday) to simply ‘ShondaNight’. Premium cable outlets precipitated the shift in casting direction with limited success; *Hawthorne* (2009, TNT) a medical drama starring Jada Pinkett Smith was cancelled after three seasons, while the bona fide hit *Orange is the New Black* (2013, Netflix) may owe more to the ambitious production values and algorithmic calculations of the behemoth streaming service.

Recent longitudinal studies (*2018 Hollywood Diversity Report*; Kuppuswamy and Younkin, 2016; *Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment* (CARD), 2016) provide a weary snapshot of the film and television industry’s discriminatory business model. The more recent McKinsey report *Black Representation in Film and TV: The Challenges and Impact of Increasing Diversity* (2021) finds that the systemic ‘barriers that undermine equity in content development, financing, marketing, and distribution come at a substantial cost [...of] \$10 billion or 7% in annual revenue’ (Dunn, Lyn, Onyeador, and Zegeye; 2021: par. 4). Aside from its deleterious cultural and moral implications, the continuance of exclusionary industry practices just makes bad business sense. While film ‘success stories’ like *Us* (2019), *Black Panther* (2018), *Moonlight* (2018), *Get Out* (2017)

⁵⁷ Though I use the term creates, ABC brought the concept from Rhimes and Shondaland executive producer Betsy Beers (Andreeva, 2013). Nevertheless, *How to Get Away With Murder* ultimately eclipsed *Scandal* in term of critical success; lead actress Viola Davis having won a Primetime Emmy for Best Actress in a Drama Series (2015) and SAG award for Outstanding Actress in 2015 and 2016.

and *Girls Trip* (2017) have demonstrated the ultimate fallaciousness of such practices, the picture is more muted in television.

Prime time soap opera *Deception* (2013, NBC), which drew strong comparisons with *Scandal*, was not renewed for a second season. Despite being produced by Steven Spielberg and starring the bankable Halle Berry, the sci-fi drama *Extant* (2014, CBS) was cancelled after two seasons. The antebellum period drama *Underground* (2016, WGN) had garnered buzz and showed promise; however, it failed to cross the critical or popular threshold set by Rhimes' programmes and was also cancelled after two seasons. However, while *Empire* (Fox, 2015-2020) and *Being Mary Jane* (BET, 2013-2019), two American dramas with black female leads, have received plaudits for their melodrama, musical score and provocative themes focusing on the black experience in the US, such programmes also demonstrate the legacy of *Scandal* in opening the door for television networks to air dramatic serials with complex and multifaceted black female protagonists.

Nevertheless, in moving black women from the periphery and placing them squarely in the centre of screenwriting, and consequently, the screen, *Scandal* is exemplary of a programme that rejects the flimsy defence of homogeneity in its casting and shows that story arcs and even whole series can revolve around so-called minorities, and even benefit from them, especially in terms of casting and technological developments (as in the case of the ARRI ALEXA). It not only breaks down old barriers and proves that success can be measured with other metrics, but also provides an accessible media format that often brings the political and cultural problems faced by people of colour to the forefront of social discourse.

As Rhimes' other productions share her inclusive casting methodology and have also achieved a high level of popular success, it is reasonable to argue that they express her

determination to change rigid institutions of power (i.e., media industries) with the aim to establish a more balanced operating mode. Her casting practices have an undertone of care, responsibility, and an understanding that, as a media gatekeeper, Rhimes has a critical role in creating a more harmonious (or conversely, a more hostile) industrial environment that inevitably trickles into social discourse. By portraying America as colourful country and a society where people of all shades live, love and work, *Scandal* paints an aspirational picture of society. By not resorting to tokenism or simply ignoring so-called race and gender relations in America, *Scandal* conspicuously makes them pivotal to the narrative, and provides refreshing images of women who are not merely defined by outdated gender expectations or ethnic identity.

Since Washington's portrayal of Olivia is so multifaceted, we cannot simply classify her as a 'positive' black role model, as if anyone could neatly fit within such a limited binary construct. It is more appropriate to assert that Olivia's antiheroism subsumes Raquel Gates' activation of negative representation as 'the repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media' (2015: 622) programmes. Indeed, to critique the character as not being representative of all black women is as misguided as it is disturbingly reductive. Instead of defining Olivia in realist terms of her blackness, it seems more discursively productive and accurate to recognise 'she represents a sort of *supertrope*—a person whose motivations might include traces of simplified stereotypes, but whose complex humanity stretches beyond the lines that would attempt to limit them to just one aspect of their character' (Pixley, 2015: 32).

5.3 Olivia Pope and Sound Registers

The predominant mood of the programme is expressible and determined by the various televisual aesthetic strategies working together to create a feeling that is both consistent and plausible. *Scandal*'s use of camera effects throughout results in an agitated feeling of perpetually being on edge. The constant flashing in every episode, besides being a genuine physical threat to those photosensitive epileptics prone to seizures, does not induce relaxation. As part of the editing regime, it quite deliberately simulates the excitability and rapidity conventionally associated with the fast-paced cutting of action films by disorienting viewers while simultaneously focusing our attention on the screen event (Thompson and Bowen, 2012).

The sensation of agitation experienced, uncomfortable though it may be, is counterbalanced by the curious pleasure entailed in the act of spying. More precisely, getting away with spying, as simulated by the bevellation, induces a guilty pleasure as if in the commission of taboo, if not illegal behaviour, that justifies itself as doubt, narratively speaking. In *Scandal*, spying is positioned as potentially profitable, if slightly unsavoury, behaviour. Its execution *should* make us feel uncomfortable as the feeling that someone is watching you in even your most intimate and private moments normally produces an unpleasant state of agitation and prolonged paranoia (provided you are not a pathological exhibitionist).

The uncomfortable and overwhelming sensations inspired by experiencing spying (and authentically appreciating its value) become a sublimity that is meant to disturb and disrupt our calm and normal perception. The pleasure that we get from the sublime Kant

would refer to as ‘negative pleasure’ (Kant, 2000: §23). It is best understood as a type of indirect pleasure that comes not from the sublime itself, but from the sense of relief we feel when we realise that this external disorder does not really have to threaten our internal order, moral or otherwise. We then recognise that spying has a thrilling purposiveness, that is independent of any real threats, namely, what Kant refers to as our ‘supersensible destination’ (Kant, 2000, §27), to be good or moral.

Scandal’s internal system of values result from the Olivia as the primary narrative agent such that her moral judgments express the programmes’ affective imperatives. In this way, *Scandal* taps into melodrama’s expressive tradition of revelation in the modern sense, using impassioned speech to express strong emotions and self-appraisal (Zarzosa, 2010). This mode ascribes to an expressive truth schema of interiority so that it intersects with viewer’s moral orientation by indexical representation and American iconography. Viewers are left with no doubt that *Scandal* is a programme about the choices we make in becoming ourselves and an emphatic conviction that the US’s plurality and polyvocality is its greatest strength and more effective than a simple either-or, good or bad, black and white morality.

When the script of *Scandal* was circulating, Washington observes how, as a woman in her mid-thirties, she had never seen a television drama with a black female lead and the part of Olivia was highly coveted. Washington was cast as Olivia because ‘it brought together so many of my worlds and so much of my life experience, working in Washington [and] working on the campaigns’ (Project Casting, 2020a). This personal connection with the character and experience in the industry impressed showrunner Rhimes and her producer partner Betsy Beers so much that when Washington arrived for her audition, she ‘came in

and it was amazing! It was literally like two seconds in, [she] started talking about politics and I knew I wanted Kerry for the part' (Stern, 2018).

The casting of Washington as Olivia imbues the show with such a captivating and convincing performance that her absence is unimaginable now. Her visage and voice exude a powerful force, with her perfectly coiffed hair accentuating her voluminous lips and the obtuse angle of her jawline, using 'the Alexander technique' to position her body and release tension. Curiously, she attributes her affective performance to stiletto shoes

because Olivia Pope had a walk and she had a posture and she had a stance... I still had to have that heel because that extra height and that extra lean forward and that extra tightness in the belly, in the core that a heel requires, that's part of the steeliness of who Olivia Pope is. So I always say I don't know who a character is until I know what shoes they're wearing, until I figure out the walk, until I figure out how they stand (Project Casting, 2020b).

Olivia is performed with a bold fearlessness, but she always sends a message, choosing silence over saying something disingenuous. It is an empowering call to action that asserts she deserves to be heard, no matter her many mistakes or flaws, and she is not afraid to express herself professionally even if it makes others uncomfortable.

Like all the regular female characters on *Scandal*, Olivia is unapologetically ambitious, occupies a successful 'non-traditional' occupation in the professional world and is highly educated. Olivia and the other women also explore their sexual and romantic identities with the men (and women) of their choosing. They are characters embodying traits that are conventionally associated with white men on television: emotionally complex, highly intelligent and financially successful. Indeed, because *Scandal* does not understate the vulnerability or raw emotion that these women are capable of *Scandal* provides a

refreshing perspective that challenges lazy conceptions of classification and inspires reflections on one's own gendered biases and in American society in general.

Olivia's melodramatic expressivity is often complementarily enacted with her characteristic lip quiver. Akin to Carrie's cry face in *Homeland*, Olivia's trembling mouth in close-up shots displays her vulnerability, confusions, pain and sadness. When her political and professional choices become personal, she is visually moved to reevaluate her position and accept blame for her actions, her tremulous facial contortions a sign of her desire to speak truth to power. Usually so stoically self-composed, such scenes soften Olivia's antiheroism, generating the tension between her desire to fix the situation and her duty to care for the well-being of others by sacrificing her individualistic freedom of agency for collective responsibility. In the end, Rhimes remarks

Olivia started out as the character that we knew who has very much believed in how important this particular kind of power was and how molding it and being a part of it was — and we watched her, like everybody else, become absolutely corrupted by it, and make all the same mistakes that everybody else makes to get what she wants from it (Goldberg, 2018: 7).

5.3.1 Aural Cohesion in the Refrains of Sadness

Often downplayed or ignored altogether in conventional television studies (Birtwistle, 2010), sound forms an inseparable component in the aesthetic pleasure of *Scandal*. The programmes' aural choices are best understood in terms of intentionality with respect to the visual cues they accompany and therefore balance. This purposive use is designed not only to simulate sounds in the real world, but also to instigate a strong and visceral affective response. These two core functions provide a deeply engrossing televisual experience that epitomises some of the magic that television is capable of; sound does not

simply supplement television's visuality but often exceeds it. The unique combination of non-diegetic sound with visual content in *Scandal* is integral to our pleasure of the show as a beautiful television work of art.

It is reasonable to suppose that *Scandal* is watched by most people either on a HDTV or (increasingly, an HD display) laptop.⁵⁸ However, HD visuals entail high-energy audio processing. *Scandal* is filmed with the most expensive professional digital motion picture camera on the market (around \$90,000 for the basic package and exceeding \$120,000 fully loaded with essential codecs, licences, and proprietary software).⁵⁹ Indeed, the ALEXA package has a wide range of trimming for each channel of input levels (performed separately), using the entire height of the display in that mode. This allows the audio recording to be directly enabled on the camera and saved onto SD cards for simplified post-production editing. In fact, 'the ALEXA was the first digital motion picture camera on the market offering in-camera recording of Apple QuickTime/ProRes files onto SxS PRO cards, providing the full range of codecs from ProRes 422 (Proxy) to ProRes 4444 XQ' (ARRI, 2017).

This permits the internal syncing of sound with video up to 120 fps without any degrading of the high-definition image quality and produces equally high definition audio and speech recordings to achieve audiovisual balance. This is critically important because these files are overlaid with music and special sound effects in post-production editing. As

⁵⁸ Never mind the increasing usage of 2K, 4K UHD and 4K Cine deliverables.

⁵⁹ According to the 2020 ARRI Price list, available at: http://www.lb-electronics.at/images/downloads/2020-10_EUR_ALL.pdf?type=file. However, cameras are usually rented rather than bought by feature films or television programmes because filmmakers choose a camera that best fits the story and the director's vision rather than using their own, can be easily swapped for a newer model and has live technical support; insurance is also a key consideration.

the ALEXA camera series natively integrates audio and visual input channels, it delivers a seamless and clear finish that makes post-production editing less time-consuming than if much ‘sound sweetening’⁶⁰ were required. Of course, the sound quality from a laptop or from an unenhanced (i.e., with no sound system) flat-screen TV is generally poor, so one must acknowledge that some of the nuance of what could be – and may be – achieved in the production process is inevitably lost before the viewer ever hears it.

This audiovisual balance is key to contemplating the combined aesthetic efficacy of technical intent and emotive performance in *Scandal*. In this section, I explore the major facets of sound utilised in *Scandal* that come together to build up the sensation of negativity and transform its technical materiality into a powerful feeling of awareness and the experience of sublime pleasure. *Scandal*’s tonal shifts between energetic action sequences and slow romantic moments give the programme an overall harmonic mood, positioning them not as irreconcilable oppositions but as the necessary conditions for a moving aesthetic experience.

Since television is an audiovisual format, sound and image are recorded at the same time and, therefore, become together. The two senses they stimulate – visual and sonic – are split in post-production, where they are each manipulated and organised through an affective intentionality, and then fused back together to express (ideally) a unique arrangement of contextual aspects, ideas, concepts and emotions. The sonic in *Scandal* is subdivided into three components: music, dialogue and effects. Although these are discussed separately from the visual for illustration, it is important to remember that they do not occur in this manner.

⁶⁰ The technical process of stripping the sound off the video recording, improving its quality, and putting it back on again with the picture portion (Zettl, 2016: 297).

Their fundamental interrelatedness is where *Scandal* derives its affective power and should be considered in conjunction with its visuality.

However, if the number of channels in the programme is higher than one's sound system can support, then channels get down-mixed to match the receiving sound system. Dialogue volume can significantly decrease during this process (relative volume to non-dialogue audio) depending on how the down-mixing is done and which channels carry dialogue (Holman, 2010). If one fails to detect the variations in the treble and pitch undulations in Olivia's voice depending on whether she is speaking to Fitz, her father, her abductor or her staff, in complex interplay with the visual counterpoints and soundtrack, one is unlikely to be swayed by the sonic phenomena contained within *Scandal*'s scope. For regular viewers, these differences accrete into autonomic affective reactions in response to diegetic differences in tempo and timing, privileging a dynamic 'texture of being' over any pretensions of realism.

5.3.1.1 Sonic Origins

Music has long been employed in the arts to convey emotion (Juslin, 2013). As an art unto itself, it composes songs (instrumental and vocal) that persist with respect to time (duration) and which vary according to pitch (which governs melody and harmony), rhythm (and its associated concepts tempo, meter, and articulation), dynamics (loudness and softness), and timbre and texture (which are sometimes termed the 'colour' of a musical arrangement (Harnsberger, 2007). Although the stunning visuals and melodramatic performances receive most of the attention, it is the music in *Scandal* that occasioned its conception. As Rhimes discloses, 'it was the soundtrack that was in my head when I was

writing the show. Finding that moment where you placed that perfect song – there’s nothing like it. The show comes alive in a very fun way once the right song has been placed’ (Ayers, 2014).

5.3.1.2 Starting with a Sonorous Soundtrack

The soundtrack over the seasons is best described as classic soul and funk from the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is evinced by the abundance of songs by The Temptations, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, KC and the Sunshine Band, Otis Redding and Stevie Wonder. There is hardly any contemporary music used but tracks by Bettye LaVette and the Album Leaf have been featured, the latter forming the musical lynchpin of the series. As a musical genre, funk and soul is characterised by being performed by predominantly black artists and containing rhythmic, danceable music that combines soul music, jazz, and rhythm and blues (R&B).⁶¹

This music becomes reconstituted as a challenge to the prevailing political authority. That is, the negative attributes associated with the longing or wistful yearning for an era where real change was occurring is being invoked in *Scandal* for a generation of viewers who were not alive during the 1960s and 1970s. Arguably, the most active (vocal and visible) at the time were the young people in their twenties. During this period, the US was experiencing a massive shift in its cultural and political makeup. From second-wave

⁶¹ One of the most pleasurable facets of *Scandal* is how the characteristics of the musical genre link to the programme. Without too much of a leap, one can imaginatively reconfigure the various elements: a strong base guitar (Olivia Pope herself), a deep and rhythmic groove (her self-assured gut feeling), vamps about single chord (melodramatic monologues when she takes on a cause), extended chords (The White Hat), melodic and strong baselines (her love interests and friends) and complex rhythms (US sociopolitical themes and narrative arcs).

feminism to the Civil Rights Movement, protests and riots in the streets to radical breaks from traditional beliefs about the sex, drugs and personal freedom, sufficient citizens were consumed with a desire to openly display their dissatisfaction with the incongruity of power within the (white and male-dominated) cultural milieu.

Rhimes notes that ‘there’s a strong sense of nostalgia to these songs...we all have our own memories tied to them. [But it is] not a mistake [the music is from] the decade that Watergate happened and America lost its innocence of what politics is. That’s definitely a piece of it in a very strong way’ (Ayers, 2014). This ‘nostalgic ‘signifier’ [as] a surface marker of a previous era – plays a powerful emotional role’ (Woods, 2008: 30), given *Scandal*’s modern political setting. One could infer that Rhimes is implicitly criticising the prevailing political apathy in much of American populace as lacking the activism that characterised the Civil Right era. The contrast between the political activism of the past and the reaction against populism of the present feels odd and creates a temporal dissonance, such that the ‘nostalgic’ soundtrack sets up a frisson between old and new in *Scandal*’s aural and visual aesthetics.

5.3.1.3 Hearing *The Light*

Light, colour and music crescendo into a genuinely beautiful frisson of signification, sentimentality and technical precision during the touching, tender and tentative body configurations in scenes exclusively involving Olivia and Fitz (Olitz).⁶² The instrumental

⁶² *The Light* is also used in S2E13 where Fitz murders Supreme Court Justice Verna after discovering she conspired with Olivia, Mellie and Cyrus to rig the presidential election Fitz ‘won’. While delivering the eulogy at her funeral, the camera swipes to a flashback of Fitz visiting Verna in the hospital where Verna tells Fitz the truth, attempting to absolve her own guilt before cancer consumes

song is aptly entitled *The Light* (2006) and is composed by the contemporary band The Album Leaf, known for their use of electronics, synthesisers and a Rhodes piano often featuring projected visual art and elaborate light installations in concert performances.

The Light is laden with competing emotional timbres – pleasure and pain (the double) – love and, in its absence, longing or desire. The opening chords are deep and indeterminate, giving no real indication of the music’s ultimate progression. Then individual, sombre notes are introduced. It continues in that vein for a short while until the same notes are played simultaneously in a higher key.

The two melodies in different registers then undulate, evoking the contrast of darkness and light. It reaches an eerie bridge where things seem to turn ominous shortly before the piece ends. The song begins to taper out with a long, steady horn in the background and the distant sound of a siren. The last notes we hear as the song fades are the same ones we hear at the beginning, becoming a leitmotif in the background of the song and show. The ambivalence of the song evokes the difficult on-again-off-again relationship between Olivia and Fitz. It symbolises that as two beings, they see the light in each other, but the circumstances of their lives cause a constant indeterminacy between them.

The Light does not occur within its entirety as the ‘one-minute moment’ until season two, when Fitz and Olivia take one minute to just look into each other’s eyes and forget about

her. The song plays all the way until its warped, ominous ending as Fitz interprets this revelation and the recognition of Olivia’s culpability as a betrayal (cued by Fitz’ very own lip quiver before a shot break that cuts to a bevelation of Olivia’s face at Verna’s funeral before cutting back to the hospital) and in his anguish, smothers Verna with a pillow in her hospital bed. This brokenness of trust acts as a narrative impediment to the Olitz romance for the remainder of the season, dimming the possibility of their happy reconciliation. We may conclude that *The Light* aims to somatically actuate frisson by fusing the propositional universality of human affect with narrative progression and character sympathy into the future hope that love is timeless, and that Olivia and Fitz will ultimately end up together.

whatever political imbroglio they are currently wrestling with. The song's harrowing chords and deep, slow, full-beat notes are foreshadowed in flashbacks in 'The Trail' (S1E6) wherein the then Governor Grant and his erstwhile campaign manager Olivia are in constantly in close quarters during the Republican presidential primary season. They initially suppress and then conceal their attraction towards each other but are ultimately overwhelmed by their feelings, acquiescing to secret moments of soft physical contact.

The duration of their alternating gazes matching the song's meter precisely, the gentle graze of his fingers on her hand precisely paralleling the delicate and deliberate articulation of the song's rhythm, the uncertainty of their situation mirroring the quiet sadness and ambiguous fade-out of the song's refrain; all elevate the sonic and the visual to the level of aesthetic abstraction, creating a frisson of negative hopefulness^[JB69]. This perpetual polar oscillation is as purposive for the creators as it is involuntary for viewers; we cannot help but wait in suspense for future episodes to resolve the ambiguity.

We never encounter *The Light* in a scene with Olivia and no Fitz. The opposite, however, is true (for example in season two, episode thirteen). *The Light* feels as if it is an invitation to connect, an opening gambit of sorts. Since Fitz is always the one who initiates the exchange, we may posit that he is the darkness evoked in the initial chords of the song, and Olivia is the light. This point is substantiated at the end of season two when Fitz approaches Olivia in the hospital after injuries incurred during the previous episode.

She is facing away from Fitz during a touching hospital scene when he asks her 'do you still love me? Do you...still love me?' (S2E19). She turns away from Fitz and towards the camera which is focused on her quivering facial reactions to his words (Figure 18). *The*



Figure 18 – Olivia deciding to break with Fitz (for the moment) while *The Light* is playing (S2E19)

Light fades out as Olivia walks away. Fitz is left looking a bit dumbstruck, but not completely lost. It is heart-wrenching to perceive that the conversation and the non-diegetic music are playing out against the clear light of day peeking through those cool stone coloured window blinds. Eyebrows slightly scrunched but not turned down in anger, we see Olivia wrestling with the weight of her choices and feel her unwillingness to display her doubt openly. It is a hopeful screen event because the bokeh is blurred and their future as Olitz is left teasingly unresolved.

5.3.2 Did You Catch That? Dialogue and Pacing

Such sad screen events are counterbalanced by the incendiary dialogue used throughout the series. Every word these characters utter – whether it be in one of the many close-up shouting monologues or in a rare but potent whisper – is packed with melodramatic

affect. Generally, broadcast television scripts are approximately 42-45 pages long, abiding by the one page per minute convention, and accounting for the 15-18 minutes of commercial advertisements in an hour-long US series (TV Script Standards). A *Scandal* script, however, is exceptional with its 60-odd pages (Rhimes, 2020). This is primarily due to what is popularly referred to as ‘*Scandal* pace’ (Goldberg, 2014). *Scandal* pace constitutes a major axis in the sonic materiality of the show wherein characters rapidly convey information in dialogues and communicate their interiority in monologues at breakneck speed (and usually at high volume).

Washington’s husky voice is an intoxicating combination of sensuousness and seriousness, her natural lower octave range having an imposing gravity when she raises its volume and tenses her vocal chords to shout, scream or simply simmer. As an affectation, it is more resonant than a high pitch, reverberating deeply off the back of her throat and lower jaw. As a performative voice, its deepness carries connotations of authority and authenticity. Compounded with *Scandal*’s other acoustics aspects, the transfiguration of Washington’s voice into Olivia’s expressivity strikes at the core of identity itself. It explains why Washington’s Alexander technique is so critical to her craft; by orientating her back, stomach and rib muscles purposefully *as if* being Olivia, she adopts different vocal traits that do not sound artificial or dysphonic.

The presentation of the deeply reverberating and harmonic timbre underscore is reflected in the narrative, particularly with respect to dialogue. Olivia and her staff are surrounded by a flurry of parties who are regarded as elite in their field, either by merit, inheritance or sheer crookery. As such, the presentation of their education, occupation, geography and situation necessitates delivering a diction that is highly intricate, and a rhythm

that is fluid and flowing, formal but fast. Also, because the heated exchanges that occur between characters are expressed as subjective camera shifts but with oblique objective angles, they take the form of simulated direct address; it often feels like the viewer is being directly shouted at. Such a protracted engagement increases the probability that that viewer remains engrossed with the story, albeit in a decidedly uncomfortable manner.

The rapidity of the speech is narratively deployed to convey the necessary urgency of finding a solution to their client's pressing problems. It is also aesthetically executed to weave anxiety into its materiality. As an *objet sonore* (sonic object),⁶³ the speech is registered not only in relation to what it narratively signifies, but also the real contours of its material production and reception (Brain, 2014). The utterly fast speech streams gesture to more than just American political expediency or the deliberate obfuscation of its characters; the sequences are also exciting to watch. Whether the character's dialogue is either uncomfortably confused or uncomfortably subversive depends on one's point of view. Scholarly work on discourse and dialogue analysis in television studies suggests that given its narrative contexts, the speech of the characters should be less precise because they are in such fraught situations (Duncan, 2006). On the contrary, the rapidity and even the volume of dialogue increased alongside the viscerally violent content as the seasons continued.

⁶³ See Pierre Schaeffer's *Treatise on Musical Objects* (2017) for his seminal treatment of sound described in exclusively phenomenological terms. Though his acousmatic reduction 'reduces sound to the field of hearing alone' (Kane, 2007: 17) as naturally indexical, when sounds are recorded and heard through speakers, their original cause is removed so its analysis becomes irreducible to its materiality, only perceivable immediately, as itself. Moreover, further reduction enables a mode of listening *entendre* that actively selects, appreciates and responds to the attributes of sounds (Kane, 2007: 18). While Schaeffer's work continues to influence musicology and sound analysis, care must be taken in mediated analyses to avoid an ahistorical essentialisation that brackets out the technological apparatuses which facilitate the reception of the sound.

Our aural engagement with *Scandal* begins to articulate how sound, particularly speech, is experienced non-cognitively. Derived from Kant's 'enhancement of the feeling of life' (2000: §3), Noël Carroll proposes that the experience of beauty in art cannot be described solely in cognitive terms but rather is the 'life of feeling' (Carroll, 2006) that precedes subjectivity and is irreducible to simple signification. Feeling our way through the sonic structures of *Scandal* is also suggestive of a somatic approach. As such, its various negative sensual impressions of spying, lying and crying are not so much rendered onscreen as they are felt by the viewer. Barbara Kennedy provides an important distinction between affect and emotion, proposing that 'affect operates through an immanence of movement, duration, force, and intensity...in sensation' (Kennedy, 2002: 101). As such, watching acousmatically entails contemplating all sensory dimensions of audiovisuality.

It is the orderly and harmonic blending of music and other artistic disciplines with the visual representation of shifting techno-cultural conventions in America, wherein people's daily lives are increasingly consumed with and governed by all manner of technological devices, which takes centre stage in *Scandal*. Often, the end results are scenes filled with anger, grief, resentment or deeply unsavoury motivations paired with music many people would associate with positive emotions. In depicting the representational discord of *Scandal*'s political context and contrasting it with contradictory audiovisual elements, the programme allows for the transference of anxiety into a form of frisson that is as uncomfortable as it is resonant, accentuating the strange beauty of the programme.

5.3.3 Refrain From Thinking: Rhythm and Broadcast Breaks

It is instructive to consider the concept of refrain as alluded to on page 200. The idea that the audiovisual materiality of *Scandal* culminates in a ‘refrain of sadness’ is drawn from observing scenes that contain these salient tender moments. These are coupled with the achingly slow bass tones and low pitch of *The Light* (becoming the governing refrain the series) acting via contrast as an anchoring motif where we are made to poignantly note and feel disjointed from the normally rapid tempo and high-pitched energy of the series. Derived from the Vulgar Latin *refringere*, ‘to repeat’, a refrain⁶⁴ is defined as the repeating musical element (melody) that, though constituent of the formal progression or movement, ‘does not constitute a discrete, independent section within the form’ (von Appen and Frei-Hauenschild, 2015: 5),⁶⁵ similar to the way that a scene is part of an episode and an episode is part of a season and a season is part of the entire series. The structure of the refrain is transposed onto the structure of *Scandal* so that it becomes not just another weaving of an artistic discipline into the formal structure of the series but also provides it with its own distinctly musical (and deeply softening) aesthetic character.

The basic pace and rhythm of the show is fast and insistent but characters’ subjective time often becomes poignantly slow during these sad narrative moments, particularly during instances where *The Light* occurs. But this juxtaposition also occurs elsewhere, the technique having been established in season one. For example, in S1E6, when Quinn, the newest

⁶⁴ In popular usage, the refrain is often used synonymously with the chorus (Von Appen, 2015). However, in musicology the refrain is distinct from the chorus such that although all choruses are refrains, not all refrains are choruses.

⁶⁵ Although commonly understood in terms of music, the earliest accounts of refrain usage appeared in the literary histories of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century romance philologists from scholars who located its origins in French literature and language (see J. Saltzstein’s *The Refrain and the Rise of the Vernacular in Medieval French Music and Poetry*, 2013).

associate recruited into Pope's firm, returns to her apartment, she finds her boyfriend's bludgeoned bloody corpse on the living room floor^[JB70]. She is visibly distraught as the camera slowly pans up from her feet until we have a close-up of Quinn's hand gripping her mobile like a vice but uncontrollably trembling.

When the scene cuts to a medium length shot, Quinn's body is frozen in convulsive shivers, her strained voice quivering as Olivia questions her. The scene is viscerally uncomfortable and confusedly compounded by the unstable, almost lingering, secondary motion of the camera's achingly slow pans. In *Scandal*, dollies pans and zooms (there are very few shots where the camera is completely stationary) are generally used for intense narrative scenes; the onscreen figures do not feel fixed but are more fluid and freely flowing as our awareness swiftly shifts through scenes. The contrasting content results from the convergence of the camera movements, the actor's performance and the tonal shifts which can be felt through the body as it experiences such sensuous televisuality.

Of course, in acknowledging its existential ontology as a commercially broadcast programme, we know that *Scandal* deliberately alters the pacing of its narrative and changes its rhythm to align with its commercial breaks. Taken together with the variations already discussed, *Scandal* has a composite affect of anticipation, anxiety and agitation. To achieve this, *Scandal* uses noticeably short shots (for example, the ASL for season one is 3.09s with episodes ranging from 2.3s to 3.4s). The rapid succession of shots, many of them extremely short, instils an urgent anxiety that forces one to remain attentive to the screen so as not to miss anything.

Coupled with the rapid speech and the upbeat fast-tempo soundtrack, one is compelled to anticipate where the slow break of the refrain will come. What we do know is

that the breaks will come.⁶⁶ The cut rate increases so rapidly around cliff-hangers – that it not only creates an inequality of expectation but one which is also precisely balanced with its aural components. For example, the exposure sequence in episode one is only 1.69s but manages to squeeze in 16 different shots!⁶⁷ That the rapidity of the dialogue, the breakneck pacing, the pulsing insistency of the flash, the rhythmic tempo, head-bopping soundtrack, operatic volume, and melodramatic performances balance with the softened and muted colour palette and *The Light* makes for a perpetual confusion of affect. So how does one make sense of these contrasting senses?

5.4 Negative Affect and Authority

The net affect of negative hopefulness [JB71] that characterises *Scandal* is considerably actuated by the sensation of frisson but generally induced by its contrasting arrangement of aesthetic elements. Frisson is derived from the Old French term *friçons* ‘shiver, shudder’⁶⁸ to describe the chills that are experienced as ripples of pleasure. This pleasure is not simply some intangible quality or occurrence but physiologically manifests itself on and through the body as piloerection.⁶⁹ An interesting feature of frisson is that it can occur in both negative

⁶⁶ In fact, an error that occurs within the simple *Cinematics* mode means the rapidity of the shots in *Scandal* makes it practically impossible to render accurate shot length; the advanced mode needs to be used to make it frame accurate and not confound transitions.

⁶⁷ According to renowned electronic music composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, at around 16 reiterations per second of a sound event, we lose the sense of the events as discrete objects and begin to hear forms of continuity instead (Holmes, 2012). This is analogous to the frames per second in early cinema. Since the human eye can only register 10-12 images discreetly, anything over is perceived as movement, hence, we have the term motion pictures.

⁶⁸ Etymologically derived from the Late Latin *frixiōnem*, accusative of *frixiō* shiver (taken as derivative of *frixiō* to be cold).

⁶⁹ Colloquially known as ‘goose bumps,’ piloerection is the erection or bristling of hairs due to the involuntary contraction of small muscles at the base of hair follicles that occurs as a reflexive response of the sympathetic nervous system especially to cold, shock, or fright or thrills.

and positive contexts. In *Scandal*, frisson results from the contrast between the rapid high energy vectors (of editing, music, and dialogue) and the lower energy vectors of the refrain, neutral colours and reflecting on the US's collective political divisions. The result are scenes filled with anger, grief, rage or deeply unsavoury motivations paired with upbeat music people would normally associate with positive emotions. *Scandal's* mismatching of sentiment suggests a more nuanced appraisal of beauty in relation to political thrillers as aesthetic objects.

Kant tells us [this viewer appraisal]^[JB72] is the legislative function of beauty. He writes that an aesthetic object directs 'something within the subject as well as without, something that is neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the supersensible ground of the latter' (2000: §59), Kant asserts it is possible to move away from our normal moral preoccupation with the characters' actions in *Scandal* that curtails our freedom in the 'real world' towards a more televisual one where alternative can be safely reflected on and, potentially, acted upon.^[JB73] As such, *Scandal* provides us with an organisation of 'formative'^[JB74] power of a self-propagating kind that it imparts to its materials' (2000: §65, emphasis, author's own) that can only be ascertained through reflective judgement and which always has an external purpose or value. Given our previous discussion on the series as a self-contained whole with its own internal purposiveness, it appears that *Scandal* is designed not only to stimulate a feeling of negative hopefulness in its viewers but also to make viewers appreciate this as a strange kind of contrasting pleasure.

When experiencing frisson in *Scandal* while watching a shocking or negatively tinted affective scene, the initial negative response is superseded by a neutral or positive appraisal, and the contrast between the two responses results in an overall positive feeling. Generally,

the immediate presentation of fear, panic, or anger may all lead to the anticipated piloerective occurrences in thrillers. Viewers can transform their initial judgments when scenes are selectively replayed, ‘transforming viewer into user and forever altering the experience of the moving image’ (Hanson, 2008: 53). When the appraisal response concurs with the reaction response, the sense of fear, panic, or anger is amplified.

But when the appraisal response contradicts the reaction response, viewers can transform the negatively valenced feelings into pleasure. Despite its frenetic pacing and rhythm, the slow audiovisual harmonics and refrain militate against our generic expectations of fear, shock, or fright to produce pleasurable sensations of hope, passion, anticipation and awe by feeling through its contrasting valences. This mode of storytelling is causally related to the exposure at the core of *Scandal*, instantiated in in skeuomorphic materiality and, especially, in its narrative, where truth is both actively uncovered and purposefully concealed.

5.4.1 Spying as Unconcealment: Truth at Any Cost?

Heidegger understood truth as ‘disclosure’ or ‘unconcealment’. This suggests that objects can reveal different aspects of themselves, depending on the modes of access we have to them^[JB75]. Spying provides that access, again, provided there is someone to do the work of unconcealing. As such, the prerequisite of exposure is at least one human being observing. This means that unconcealment is not only part of the world but also part of the human condition itself.

Spying, for *Scandal*’s purposes, is merely a manifestation of the concept of unconcealment that (covertly) uses careful observation or scrutiny to expose information or

intelligence about another person, place, or entity. Formulating it in this way is important because it interprets the term for truth in its original etymological sense of ‘revealing’, that is, ‘making manifest that which in some sense lies hidden’ (Heidegger, 2002: 252). Such attempts to analyse unconcealment (as spying in *Scandal*) results in narrative truths that somehow still conceal their real structure. This surprising strangeness contributes to the suspense in *Scandal* as viewers are primed to anticipate such revelations but have little inkling whether they will happen.

The material manifestation of unconcealment in *Scandal* is the embedded repetition of a range of luminous occurrences – exposures. These exposures however, themselves blur both in meaning for us and within the narrative, suggesting that this concealing veneer may be the natural state of objects. Though it is considered socially taboo (and often illegal), spying as unconcealment can occasion authenticity. Kant argues that objects initially manifest only their appearance and conceal what they most authentically are (Kant, 1998: §37-38), but is clear this has no bearing on our ability to make aesthetic judgements about them. Authenticity by contrast, consists in *Dasein* learning to ‘uncover the world in its own way ... this uncovering of the “world” [is] ... always accomplished as a clearing away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which *Dasein* bars its own way’ (Heidegger, 2002: 129). Accordingly, *Scandal* reconfigures duality into a strange aesthetic harmony by valorising truth in the real world (e.g., in the Twitter discourses) while disabusing its ideation (in the fictive storyworld).

As a thriller, *Scandal*’s narrative and accompanying representational tropes are intended to elicit immediate thrills. From the perpetual spying on each other, the emotional and physical abuse heaped onto their closest friends and allies, the political corruption and

malfeasance, to the multiple murders committed, the main characters on *Scandal* are meant to be highly unlikable. Despite its frenetic pacing and rhythm, the underlying audiovisual harmonics and recursive refrain militate against our generic expectations of fear, shock, or fright to produce pleasurable sensations of hope, exhilaration, and awe *through* transformation by contrasting audiovisual signifiers with opposite aesthetic valences. This opposition, as Lowes maintains, is precisely what makes *Scandal* such a good thriller. She observes that Rhimes ‘has created a whole world where we’re constantly against the clock. It adds to the audience’s anxiety, and they feel the pressure we feel — and it adds to the excitement’ (Goldberg, 2014: 4).

5.4.2 To Shonda Rhimes’ Credit

Rhimes’ playful preoccupation with time is understandably nostalgic considering she was born in 1970, amidst a period of significant social and political upheaval. It is not inconceivable that the prevailing movements, ideas and sentiments of this period’s inequality constituted a formative influence on her life and her ultimate development as a contemporary practitioner. Because Rhimes grew up in such a volatile point in American history, notions of contrast are necessarily written into the very fabric of expression in *Scandal*; certainly at least for the pilot episode which Rhimes’ authored exclusively. It suggests a feeling of stagnation about the current sociopolitical milieu, one that could benefit from the transformative energy that effected change in the past.

For Rhimes, there was surely a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment felt in protesting against agents of the past, overcoming and changing their socially restrictive systems and institutions. The real struggle for freedom and choice for black Americans has

been protracted over centuries (if such work is ever ‘complete’ given the recent Black Lives Matter sociopolitical movement in the US) and often wrought in blood. It is fitting that many of the aesthetic forms produced in *Scandal* ring with energetic notes and flashy flourishes (Young, 2019). There must be a sound pleasure for Rhimes in making personal creative choices that reject racialised discourses over commercial success, or in her brand of ‘celebrity feminism’ that emphasises the success of women navigating through the corruption and misogyny of the workplace and sociopolitical status quo (Lagerwey, et al., 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising *Scandal*’s aesthetic is immediate, catchy, bold and appealing to the masses to (hopefully) excite viewers and to contemplate time and space as genuine aesthetic objects.

While formerly disenfranchised people today largely benefit from these historical antecedents, we did not directly pay the price for the freedoms we take for granted and many often do not appreciate its true cost. In this sense, Rhimes and her creative cohort on *Scandal*

have grappled with the pressure to balance everything and to look flawless while doing so...they’ve both managed to be simultaneously political and apolitical, to inspire without rocking the boat too much (Phillippe, 2018: par. 4),

not just because they can do it but also because they choose to. They ultimately expend their talents in weaving contrasts of implicit notions of past wrongs with some familiar experiences of the present and bold possibilities for the future. It is unknowable how history will come to regard Rhimes’ influence on the television industry insofar as she pushes against persistent norms of diversity, but assuredly her suspense crafting skills will stand up to the test of time as bold, beautiful, strongly political but, more importantly, utterly spellbinding for viewers.

Conclusion

Much of the beauty in *Scandal* (and indeed television) resides in its seriality, a temporal element not matched by film, though current film studios attempt to approach it through reboots, sequels, trilogies, and franchises.⁷⁰ The protracted objective duration of *Scandal*'s progression allows its creative producers to craft complex, deeply flawed and morally ambiguous characters such as Olivia Pope that viewers struggle to accept but then begin to feel attached to over time as their characterisation deepens and becomes more nuanced.

Scandal has frequently been negatively criticised for the perceived duration of its character's equally negative dispositions without explanatory exposition (Philippe, 2018; Star, 2015; Stanley, 2012). Yet, this was Rhimes' intention. She foregrounds that the pleasure in conceiving and writing *Scandal* did not derive from knowing much about the background of the characters, but in the purposeful withholding of narrative facts. She states,

there were things that we didn't know...I love that we can bounce back and forth, to reveal things as needed. It was purposeful for me that we didn't reveal anybody's backstory early. People say, these characters have no backstory. Well, there's a reason for that. You're discovering

⁷⁰ This is an important observation, as it tries to match television's seriality. Much of the power of television programmes stems from their ability to change over time and reinforce, evolve, and develop ones feeling for its being and the knowledge it imparts and bridge. More detailed future research would do well to consider the closer convergence of film and television in Marvel Studio's strategy of making blockbuster films that lead into limited television series which then directly tie back into forthcoming films. It further blurs the boundaries between the two media formats and is an illuminating case study of convergence seriality as 'transmedia storytelling' in the current phase of the new Golden age of Television (Brinker, 2016). Such repositioning, so as not to be left behind by viewer's creative selection, entails the renegotiation of cultural values with 'varied commercial and regulatory interests that also mediate in the creation of cultural forms' (Lotz, 2014: 51). Since factors such as historical sociopolitical shifts are difficult, if not impossible, to predict, the current so-called 'third golden age of television' or 'Peak TV', can be broadly defined in stylistic terms that both formalise the prevailing forms and contextualise their cultural milieu.

it along with us, as opposed to a lot of shows that tell you exactly who everybody is up front (Kamp, 2013: 1).

Scandal is lauded for its historical casting, ‘high-octane thrills’ and ‘modern harlequin romance’ (Phillippe, 2018: par. 1) that pairs melodramatic performances with the dramatic force of a political thriller. While Hollywood films tend to avoid such ambiguous or negative leads over likeable or agreeable characters viewers can more easily sympathise with (e.g., superhero franchises, happy endings, Hollywood stars, etc.), television programmes can invest more time on the gradual and often surprising revelation of details that justify unexpected narrative events and anti-heroes (i.e., Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*). This ‘slow burn’ is particularly effective in *Scandal* where the rapidly mounting tension prolongs the occasions of release (i.e., the refrain) and sustains viewer attention. One gets a real sense of the excitement and thrilling pleasure of staging the unknown that Rhimes and the production team revel in from season to season.

To conclude, *Scandal* emphasises contrast through its thematic deployment of exposure. It embeds the thriller generic sensory expectation of anticipation into its structure, setting up the audience with a suspenseful narrative and negative characters, but transforms these with excitement and agitation into hopeful resolution. The greyness that characterises exposure is the absolute transition between white and black and the very definition of contrast; an aesthetic concept that can transform a viewer’s perceptual experience. Additionally, its casting choice of a black lead sharply contrasts with the conventional white representation in American television dramas. Moreover, the exemplary use of opposing registers of music affixed to character development and narrative progression is harmonic rather than dissonant. This precise arrangement of sound, light and colour creates a

paradoxical visual vertigo (along with flashing lights, bevellation and wipes) that is, nevertheless, strangely pleasurable.

CHAPTER 6 – DEALING WITH A COLLAPSED *HOUSE OF CARDS*

Everything has beauty but not everyone sees it.

Confucius

Introduction

While both *Homeland* and *Scandal* straightforwardly have female leads, the inclusion of *House of Cards* as a case study requires some justification because for the first five seasons Robin Wright was ‘co-lead’ alongside Kevin Spacey. Were Wright merely part of the regular or recurring cast, it would be difficult to argue convincingly that *House of Cards* falls into the loose but distinct grouping that forms the analytic core of this project. As an executive producer and co-lead whose prominence and screen time increases over the seasons, however, Wright eclipses Spacey to receive top billing (Warner, 2018).

In the final season of *House of Cards*, Wright becomes the sole lead protagonist Claire Underwood. This is, unfortunately, the direct result of the allegations of sexual misconduct against Spacey from fellow actor Anthony Rapp, after a party in Spacey’s apartment in 1986 (Jacobs, 2020). Although Spacey apologised for his ‘deeply inappropriate drunken behaviour’ (Spacey, 2017), the accusation, along with the circulating cultural climate instigated by the *#MeToo* movement, precipitated at least fifteen more claims of sexual impropriety (BBC, 2019). Indeed, the distinguished Old Vic Theatre in London, where Spacey was artistic director from 2003 until 2015, lodged twenty sexual complaints against the actor (Dowd, 2017), some of which are still under investigation as of this writing.

When several *House of Cards*' employees reported that Spacey's predatory behaviour had turned the set into a 'toxic' work environment, with one claiming sexual assault (Melas, 2017), Netflix intervened at a cost of \$39 million, stripping him of his role as executive producer and ousting him from the cast as well as cancelling a planned Gore Vidal biopic (Serjeant and Richwine, 2017). Wright expressed surprise and sadness, although she admits their relationship was purely professional and that she 'didn't know the man – only the incredible craftsman that he is' (Bradley, 2018: 4). Albeit inadvertently, Spacey's real-life persona embodies the substance of 'the zeitgeist of distrust directed against our political institutions, acting out the sordid story that [some] suspected was happening behind the curtain' (Di Placido, 2018: 4). Netflix briefly considered pulling the final season altogether in light of the Spacey fallout (Iannucci, 2018) but Wright herself 'led all of this charge [sic] so that people would save their livelihoods', according to co-star Patricia Clarkson (Stefansky, 2018: 2).

As the final political thriller in our subgeneric grouping, *House of Cards* too plots the manoeuvrings and intrigue in Washington D.C. The programme follows the ambitious and garrulous Democratic House Congressional majority whip from South Carolina Frank Underwood's (Spacey) recent failed appointment to Secretary of State after the newly re-elected President Walker reneges on their agreement. Like a modern incarnation of *Richard III* (Shakespeare, 1597), Frank begins his simultaneous ascent to power and descent into consummate corruption alongside his wife. Claire runs a clean water NGO whose opaque infrastructure contracts are facilitated by Frank's political connections, obscure shady motives and questionable business alignments. Claire also shares her husband's ruthless pragmatism and his lust for power.

Throughout the series, they frequently scheme together to ensure the success of each other's ventures with help from their long-time friend and political operative Remy Danton (Mahershala Ali), a corporate lobbyist and Frank's former staffer. Other regular characters include Zoey Barnes (Kate Mara), a reporter who begins a romantic relationship with Frank in exchange for exclusive stories; Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania recovering from a drug and alcohol addiction; Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), Frank's loyal White House Chief of Staff, Janine Skorsky Constance Zimmer), a reporter at *The Washington Herald* and Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) Zoey's boss and former editor at *The Washington Herald* who belatedly begins to piece together the clues surrounding Zoey's death and uncovers the extent of Frank's illegal activities at the cost of his life. Over the seasons, many other characters are introduced and unceremoniously dispatched when they are no longer useful or considered a liability.

This chapter will follow the same lines of inquiry as the previous analysis chapters, insofar as they draw attention to *House of Cards*'s most salient aesthetic qualities. However, I will focus more on the formal narrative structure of the programme and its calculated visuality, these being determined by Netflix's algorithmic aesthetic and its adaptation of elements from the UK *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990) to instil the programme with a strange feeling of capacious claustrophobia replete with a cold and detached sympathy for its lead characters. The first section considers the significance of light and colour in creating the visual style and tone of the programme, paying special attention to the impact of the creative decisions made by David Fincher, who in addition to acting as an executive producer, directed the first two episodes of *House of Cards*. The second section discusses the form of the programme as a political thriller, paying close attention to its representation of spying, its

literary devices and origins, and the implications of Netflix's model of seriality. The third section focuses on the affect and sensations attributed to the anti-excessive melodramatic performance of Wright, the significance of stilettos in Claire's characterisation and the impact of jazz music on the mood of the programme. The final section considers the stillness that pervades *House of Cards*' theme of control and reflects on the concept of power in terms of this control before concluding on the confusion of the final season.

6.1 Such Calculated Visuality

The visual style of *House of Cards* is, in the first instance, attributable to executive producer David Fincher, who was given free rein (Hooton, 2015) to develop a television political thriller which capitalised on the capacity of televisual seriality to develop complex characterisations, relations and themes; an option not available in a self-contained film (Abele, 2013). Fincher began his career in the 1980s as a visual effects producer and matte photographer before he moved to directing music videos (Rebello, 2014),⁷¹ which has left an indelible fingerprint on his work. Over the next twenty years, he established his oeuvre directing fourteen variably successful films including *Aliens 3* (1992), *Fight Club* (1997), *Seven* (1995) and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2002). Notably, *Aliens 3* received an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects while *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* received thirteen nominations at the eighty-first Academy Awards, for which Fincher received a nomination for Director.

⁷¹ As a music video director, Fincher has won two Grammy Awards for Best Music Video, for his work in *Love Is Strong* (1995) by The Rolling Stones and *Suit & Tie* (2013) by Justin Timberlake and Jay-Z, three MTV Video Music Awards for Best Direction and MTV Video Music Awards for Best Direction for Madonna's *Express Yourself* (1989) and *Vogue* (1990).

While these films merit discussion in their own right, in terms of Fincher's work on *House of Cards*, it is illuminating to look particularly at his work on thrillers, namely *Seven* (1995), *Panic Room* (2002), *Zodiac* (2007) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). Herein, Fincher clearly grounds his style within such a dark pseudo-realism it might be mistaken for noir. These films expend an equal amount of effort in generating haunting suspense as they do in balancing conceptual considerations with coordinated visuality.

Darkness is one of the most identifiable elements in Fincher's work and subsequent influence. Fincher does not use the high chiaroscuro contrast employed in many thriller films (often referred to as a thick negative) but instead uses a much narrower range of light (O'Falt, 2017). This self-imposed technical limitation allows viewers to better observe forms and movements in the back and mid-ground shadows. This works on a metaphorical level too: as *House of Cards* is a political thriller that aims to draw our attention to the more shadowy aspects of political intrigue, seeing such detail in the darkness allows the exposure gradient to transcend its technical materiality and become a subtle part of the narrative. Fincher's aesthetic choices work well with digital cinematography, of which he became an early proponent while it was still in its infancy (Davis, 2014), as he can precisely gradate the onscreen composition while working in the lower end of the exposure range to create a deeply nuanced depth of field.

In *House of Cards*, Fincher darkened compositions has the effect feel like we are in danger of being drowned in the hidden depths of the Washington's murky underworld. It imbues *House of Cards* with a smokiness that is echoed in the narrative punctuations of Frank and Claire's clandestine smoking scenes when they are plotting their next moves. Though he

only directed the first two episodes, styled as ‘Chapters’⁷², renowned directors such as Joel Schumacher, Carl Franklin and James Foley have followed suit by adopting Fincher’s cinematographic template.

This is perhaps Fincher’s greatest achievement in crafting the look and tone of the programme – having acquired an abundance of experience working on film thrillers and intrepidly developing techniques incorporating evolving digital technologies such as RED and colour grading (Ferrari, 2017), he is complicit in the construction of ‘a new kind of realism in cinematography where conventional lighting is thrown out and the onus is on us to extract what we need from what little we can see...It makes the audience work and pay attention to keep up with the story’ (Nedomansky, 2013: 8). Fincher is also responsible for the subtler computer-generated green-screen effects that are virtually unnoticeable onscreen – car scenes, all the TV screens and even the main title sequence.⁷³

6.1.1 Colour Scheme and Visual Tone

This sequence is one of the most visually striking of the series and, unlike those in *Scandal* or *Homeland*, it has remained virtually untouched throughout the series’ run, except that between seasons one and two, the seasons change from autumn to winter, foreshadowing the coldness to come. It is a time-lapse sequence created by artist Andrew Geraci, whom Fincher found on the video website *Vimeo* (Maragos, 2013). However, Fincher intervened in post-production to delete all the people because he wanted the sequence to be ‘all about the

⁷² To prevent confusion, *House of Cards* episodes are labelled with a capital ‘C’ and chapters of the thesis uses the lower-case ‘c’.

⁷³ Fincher went on to win the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Director for ‘Chapter 1’ of *House of Cards*.

cars and edifices and the city of DC, but not about the people' (Maragos, 2013: 5). It tells a condensed visual story of the sun setting on Washington showing a 'dirty, gritty, and grungy' (Maragos, 2013:4) image of the capital which frame the series with the view that power is not pretty, despite the grandiose architecture, austerity and immaculate order of its interior scenes. Though the daytime scenes are still quite raw and unpolished, it is noteworthy that when darkness descends, the city looks more beautiful, as if the darkness conceals the filth. The sequence consists of thirty-seven time-lapse clips (running nearly 110 seconds) shot entirely with Canon 5D Mark II and III cameras in HDR (high dynamic range) which meant the team was able to shoot '3 separate frames with 3 separate exposures' (Maragos, 2013: 9) to facilitate seamless blending and transitioning.

The dull tones and austereness of these shots coupled with the wide lenses and low angles make for a menacing feeling of coldness and disconnectedness. That the sequence transitions into night-time D.C. is itself symbolic of the show: things will only get darker and more sinister as time goes on. Moreover, that Fincher took such effort to remove all the people from the main title sequence suggests that in *House of Cards* the DC storyworld is soulless. It lacks any real humanity, much like the characters who populate it. They are mostly power-hungry and jockeying to increase their position and influence on the detriment of whomsoever stands in their way. Though they claim to be serving the country, these claims are devoid of substance and sincerity, their actions hollowly self-serving. As such, simple human connections escape them because real, intimate relationships are a hindrance to the acquisition of power.

While Fincher's general film colour palette is muted, desaturated and extremely consistent (black and another primary colour). In *House of Cards* the palette is black with

arctic blue/teal (in the foreground) and pale yellow/orange (in the background). This stylistic device is a cinematographic convention used in films to convey contrast. Its justification and execution are straightforwardly derived from basic colour theory – when directors wish to create an onscreen focal point, they use complementary colours to make the foregrounded figure stand out (Petrie, Boggs and Boggs, 2011). Since the flesh tones on the characters range between the pale pinkish yellow of Claire to the dark brown of Remy and constitute various shades of orange, the colour that contrasts best with orange is blue. Thus, the level of shadows is increased in the cyan colour field and the highlights are distributed across the orange field.

Complementary colour pairing [contrasts](#)^{LT77} the qualities of the colours themselves with their affective capacities with their opposition⁷⁴: blue is perceived as cool while orange is perceived as warm (Brown, 2016). This duality is conceptually formalised as a trope, especially in theatre contexts, where it often acts to frame the moral structure of the production (Crabtree and Beudert, 2005). This colour-coded morality is useful when the fictional characters occupy an ambiguous or grey storyworld, acting as a visual directive for viewers' orientation into the narrative, but it is not an established genre convention. Since this blue and orange morality represents fictional characters whose 'moral codes and compasses [are] so utterly alien, we scarcely recognise them as morality at all' (Cowan, 2018: 182), every programme or production can personalise their meanings.

In *House of Cards*, blue and its proximate hues (teal, navy, cyan, etc.) make the characters seem uninterested in others due to their coolness. It is no accident that Claire and

⁷⁴ *House of Cards* uses a complementary colour scheme. Complementary colours, as discussed above, are directly opposite one another on the colour wheel, perceived as having the most vivid contrast (Choudhury, 2014).

Frank often dress in these colours and this makes them appear reserved insofar as viewers and other characters in the programme seldom know what they are thinking or planning; their motivations are reserved for narrative asides. On the other hand, yellow and its adjacent hues (orange, amber, brown, etc.) are normally associated with energy and activity (Mollica, 2013). It is a remarkable reversal that *House of Cards* uses the orange colour field for background mise en scène. This inversion allows the programme to maintain the spatial kineticism by contrasting complementary colours while contributing to the characters' moral ambiguity. This is evinced by their actions: although they often perpetrate acts normally regarded as heinous, they tend to act as if nothing were the matter because in their world and according to the logic of their interiority, it is merely what they do as a matter of necessity to achieve their goals.

While this type of contrast can be easily achieved with colour grading, according to *House of Cards*' director of photography Igor Martinovic for season two, it is a result of intentional production design in the programme, a 'natural occurrence' that 'depends on many factors such as the time of day/night, position of actors and lights in space and relative to one another, set design, [and] costumes' (Bryan, 2015: 3). What is important to note now is how this colour contrast contributes to the perception of depth in the onscreen composition. This is because blue and yellow are opposite each other on the colour wheel and chromaticity diagram, they have the highest contrast between their exposures of any complementary colour combination (Mollica, 2013). This a strange phenomenon of perception because 'the human eye tends to perceive shadows as cold and lighting sources as warm. In terms of colour, this translates into blue and yellow. With all things being equal, the white object in the shadow will appear bluish and the one in sunlight yellowish' (Rankin, 2015: par. 5).

Relying on this visual quirk helps establish *House of Cards*' extremely shallow depth of field as a formal production code that later directors emulate in later seasons, making the programme's style consistent throughout. This constant shallow depth of field is the opposite of *Scandal*'s bevellation where the bokeh, or blur, occurs in the foreground rather than in the background. In *House of Cards*, it creates a visual analogue for lead characters' dualistic interiority that builds on the duality established by the contrasting colours. Viewers get a sense of this when, for example, they notice that Claire and Frank are often hidden in shadows and silhouettes. When they walk into the foreground from the background, they walk into the light and corresponding focus from the peripheral shadows, emphasising their dual nature – from their private and self-interested ruminations to their politically cool, outwardly beneficent behaviour as public servants.

These subtle movements as a function of lighting and staging are necessary because *House of Cards* has extraordinarily little overt activity in terms of action sequences. Indeed, the programme's emphasis on a strong and stable visual composition results in slow, deliberative camera motion. Panning and zooming on handheld camera or Steadicam are eliminated, while scenes are filmed straight on in a symmetrically geometric fashion, having no discernible tilt (Grouchnikov, 2014). Instead, *House of Cards* uses Kino Flos⁷⁵ to fill out and widen shots, increasing the visual field and further maximising depth. This method of filming expands the composition and gives viewers more surface area and texture with its elaborate sets. Such production considerations reduce the amount of blocking required by the actors, as conceived by Fincher, who according to Eigil Byrld, wanted 'everything to be very

⁷⁵ Kino Flo is a lighting equipment company that uses a proprietary colour science in its manufacture of cool, tube-based arrays with colour-correct tungsten and daylight balanced light that intensifies luminosity and eliminates tints in the magenta-green spectrums.

composed, and designed to communicate a sense of power and space. He wanted each frame and each composition to really grab the audience with its volume, gravity, drama and darkness' (Kreindler, 2013).

6.1.2 The Cinematography of Eigil Bryld

Of course, given that every television programme is a collaborative effort, Fincher is not solely responsible for *House of Cards*' visual style. For a more complete picture we need to also consider the impact of Danish cinematographer Eigil Bryld.⁷⁶ *House of Cards* is the first production on which they have worked together and, while the two decided that they would use two LED Epic cameras simultaneously to film the first two episodes, Bryld used ARRI/Zeiss Master Prime lenses to shoot 'wide open, mostly around a 1.8, and centered camera movements on a track or a boom' (*Sound and Picture*, 2013: 6) or dolly mount.

Though they shot the series in 5K resolution, they composed it in a 4K frame to allow them to precisely colour grade in post-production (*Sound and Picture*, 2013) and to correct any stabilising mistakes. By eliminating pans and zoom lenses from their cinematographic calculus, filming became more about creating and shaping the space with cast blocking and using low angles to imbue the scenes and shots with a powerful yet unflattering view of DC and the people who inhabit the political world. Bryld was undoubtedly aware of Fincher's penchant for dark and moody productions and their synergy is evident in *House of Cards*.

Speaking with camera trade publication *Sound and Picture*, Bryld recalls that

⁷⁶ For his work on the programme, Bryld won the 2013 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Cinematography for a Single-Camera Series.

there was definitely tweaking in the beginning in order to figure out how far to take the darkness of the show. It takes a lot of guts to go that dark. When people say they want to make it dark, they usually don't end up going this far and want to see everything that's going on still. We wanted to create a sense of undercurrent and drama in order to give the image volume and a stronger sense of space (2013: 5).

This has the effect of creating a programme where the darkness is both bold and subtle. Where the shots are enveloped in gradation of grey, the onscreen details are obscured, enhancing the perception of hidden spatial volume.

Given that Bryld strived to give 'each frame as much volume, power and darkness as possible' (Heuring, 2013: 3), it is not surprising that the lighting is set up to make the viewer feel as overwhelmed and tense as possible. In serving a narrative function, light acts a proxy for the power and corruption that dominates the world such that characters' movements in and out of light are a visual analogue to represent the dual aspects of their interiority. Its importance cannot be understated. Since there is so little action in *House of Cards*, the interplay of light is necessary to keep the eyes engaged. It is coordinated with dialogue and tropes in a codex fashion; we know that when there is a public scene and we as viewers are as aware of what is happening as the characters are, the light is more diffuse with very few highlights. Conversely, when there is a backroom deal being undertaken, the contrast is high and darkness envelops the scene.

Moreover, *House of Cards* was shot in 2:1 aspect ratio to give the programme a significantly wider feel than (what has now become the standard) 16:9. The expansiveness of the interiors allowed Bryld and his team to use low levels of light while still maintaining shots with shallow depths of field. It also facilitates the wide shots that have come to characterise *House of Cards* while enabling the actors to complete a scene without cutting and interrupting the flow of their performance. The creators went for a cooler palette, with

reds, oranges and magentas absent or significantly colour graded in post-production. Altogether, *House of Cards*' visual techniques blend purposefully to create a sense of stark realism, drama and hidden volume that compels viewers to open their eyes and look for clues.

Should viewers take this prompt seriously, they would discover other artistic gems scattered in the background. Not only does *House of Cards* initially use famous paintings as an ironic backdrop when Frank secretly meets his lover (journalist Zoey Barnes) in museums to feed her information in season one, the series later incorporates classical paintings within its mise en scène, such as the numerous Rothko's that appear in season five, and even uses Danish paintings as inspiration in the constructions of its own onscreen compositions. This is the influence of Bryld and the production designer Steve Arnold. Recalling that Bryld hails from Denmark, one can assume that given his position, he was exposed to the Danish painting masters at some point in his formative years and professional tutelage.

6.1.3 Compositional Parallels with Vilhelm Hammershoi

House of Cards designs set pieces and composes shots that appear to be directly influenced by Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershoi. Born in 1864, Hammershoi's interest in painting and composition began whilst he was still a young boy of eight, indisputably becoming the most prestigious Danish painter of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Emblematic of the individualistic and isolated Modernism that was sweeping across much of Western Europe and the United States at the time, Hammershoi was immensely popular when he debuted his early paintings and is now regarded as one of Denmark's national treasures. What we can clearly see from his most famous works, painted in his Christianhavn (Copenhagen) apartment on Strandgarde 30 and which became the foundation for the more

than sixty paintings that his reputation is built on, is that Hammershoi's works have a deeply meditative quality and evoke a sense of silence and secretiveness.

Often compared to his compatriot Johannes Vermeer for his obsessive use of interiors, Hammershoi's austere palette of dusky greys, desaturated yellows and dull browns create soft nuances of shadow and give his austere paintings a faded smoky patina (Figure 20). There is extraordinarily little contrast and there is a palpable sense of emptiness. *House of Cards* adopts these qualities from Hammershoi's paintings. We see this in the exteriors that



Figure 19 – composition comparison with Hammershoi's *Interior With Piano and Woman in Black* (1901) (image taken from Toby Wright, 2015)

Hammershoi painted, whether of the traditional landscape variety or of the more impressive and imposing edifices in London and Copenhagen, he completely omits people within the composition, much like the main title sequence in *House of Cards*. The solemnity and seriousness of these works is transposed into the programmes, where the colour and the relationships between spaces, movement (or lack thereof) and ulterior deliberative interiority are equally important.

There are other parallels to be drawn from the spartan interiors. According to the Oordrupgaard (the national arts curatorial board and museum which has collected many of Hammershoi's most significant paintings in its efforts to curate and exhibit Danish art from the masters of 'the Golden Age' for the Danish public), Hammershoi forwent explicitly modern motifs, and in using his apartment and wife as models, depicted his lived experience in his paintings (2018). Their off-white walls and sparse but fine furniture – Victorian in styling and architecture but lacking the overcrowding – is like the Underwood's DC home with its tall windows, pocket doors, classic lighting fixtures and uncluttered space having only the faintest 'touch of modernity' (Figure 20).



Figure 20 – composition comparison with Hammershoi's *Interior* (1899) (image taken from Toby Wright, 2015)

In *House of Cards*, the major characters mostly wear dark and cold hues and the background is generally in neutral tones or pale yellows, creating a 'silhouetting effect that's a sophisticated visual aspect' (Fernandez, 2016: 3) that feels as though the characters are like figures inhabiting a painting on the wall of a museum. Moreover, the familiar tableau in Hammershoi's oeuvre of a woman (again, coincidentally, his long-suffering wife) either with her back to us or turned away is almost the same way that Claire is represented throughout

seasons one through four. It is not really until season five that she is frontally featured for an extended period and not until the final season six that she begins to directly address the viewers.

The combined creative influences of Fincher, Bryld, Martinovic and (likely) Hammershoi results in camera movement being carefully curtailed in *House of Cards*. Since the camera virtually never pans and tilts at the same time, blocking is of crucial consideration (Sound and Picture, 2013). Also, because the wide framing gives a lot of space around the actors in relation to the key set-up – it does not move up, down, left, or right, and only very rarely follows the characters (except when the mise en scène is heavily populated with extras or set pieces), in *House of Cards* the actors' figures inhabit the space. This codex of wide frames and static camera⁷⁷ keeps viewers at a distance from the characters, with the uses of close-ups extremely limited to important narrative turning points.

This generates a strange mix between feeling trapped (by using an immobile camera) despite the excess amount of space (wide shots). This paradox of control creates a curious capaciousness in compositions such that there is a separation between viewers and characters. Such framing makes it spatially difficult for viewers to become visually attached to objects while simultaneously^[LT78] making us want to narrow our perspective in on the characters^[LT79]. This, of course, makes viewers work hard, effectively keeping them more engaged in the programme.

⁷⁷ The cinematographer for the second season, Igor Martinovic, recounts that *House of Cards* used the camera movement and placement of the film *Being There* (1979, Hal Ashby) as a model 'with its static and objective (and oftentimes symmetrical) framings as one of [*House of Cards*] primary influences [for] keeping the camera at a distance from the characters and allowing the actions to take place within a wider frame' (Hardy, 2014: 6-7).

Other signature elements include obscuring the faces of mysterious characters in the shadows so their identity remains concealed; production design that enhances the experience of colour (e.g., wood in home settings makes it appear warmer and the coldness of the institutional buildings comes from reflective surfaces and fluorescent lights); elongated and uncut tracking shots that remain smooth even through wall and foregrounded panes; shallow depth of field; single frames inserted into scenes; aligning camera movements with a central character's movements to signify their emotional state or interiority; and ambiguous endings, i.e., leaving viewers 'in the dark' as to the ultimate fate of characters therein.

6.2 Shaping the Structure

Being a political thriller contemporaneous with *Homeland* and *Scandal*, one might expect a there to be a surfeit amount of spying in *House of Cards* in a similar vein to how it is depicted in the former programmes. Spying does occur in *House of Cards*, but it is an entirely different type of exposure. As a topical programme, surveillance is both subject matter and plot in several episodes, particularly during season two's arc on cyber hacking and season four's plot points of secret domestic metadata collection and election interference (fittingly during the 2016 US presidential election). Yet, during these episodes, neither of our lead characters engage in the act of spying themselves. This creates a level of distance between the persons being spied on and the culpability of Fank and Claire. They may direct their subordinates spy for them, but they are so far removed from it, they never get their hands dirty, narratively speaking.

Spying is present in *House of Cards* but it takes the form of the investigative journalists at the *Washington Herald*, where computer FUIs are used to research the stories

that ultimately leads to the commissions of murder perpetrated directly by the power couple. Frank's second murder occurs after Zoey deduces he killed fellow Congressman Peter Russo. To keep her from revealing the truth, he shoves her in front of an oncoming train. Spying also takes on another narrative vehicle when it becomes personified in the author Thomas Yates (Paul Sparks) doing his own search for truth. His imminent exposé on the true state of the Underwoods' marriage leads Claire to commit her second murder although her first was an assisted suicide is at her mother's own behest as she was dying of terminal cancer. To keep everyone from getting too close, they both make clear that control over the narrative is paramount and they will eliminate anyone could potentially change it.

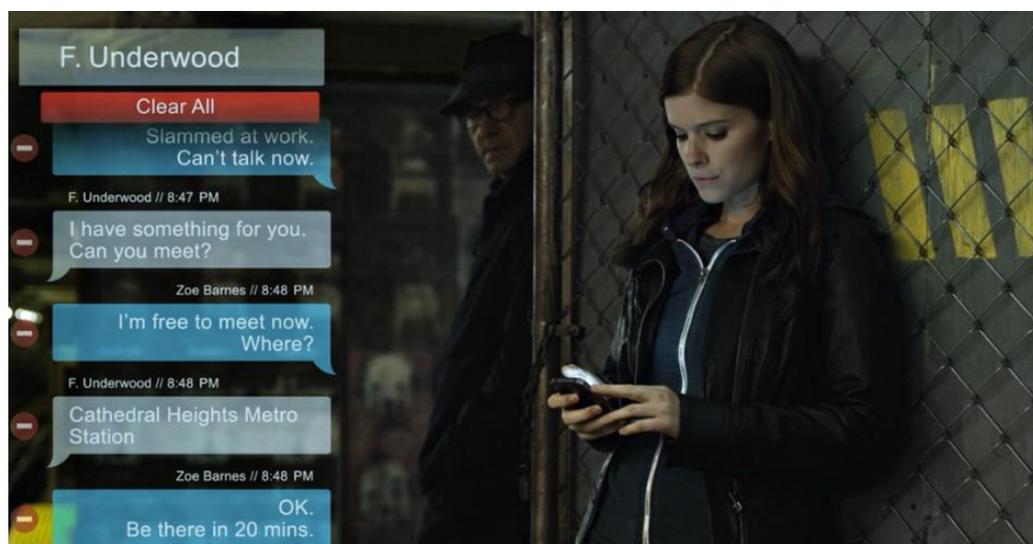


Figure 21 - text bubble on screen (Chapter 13)

Spying FUIs still appear in the form of mobile phones, remaining a motif as they are in *Homeland* and *Scandal*. However, rather than simply film characters using their phone, messages appear on the television screen in the form of text bubbles or 'captions', paradoxically erecting another material barrier to connection through the morphism of communication channels. This aesthetic device was 'new' when it debuted in season two,

Chapter 13. Although the television convention is credited to *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010), it also appears the same year in the British soap opera *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 2010-present). However, its first occurrence in the modern film era can be traced back to *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (Iwai, 2001), a Japanese film in which the identity of the character who is writing the pop-up messages that appear onscreen is withheld from viewers for the whole of the film.

Character differentiation is also important to Fincher, although he is not quite as cryptic in his usage. Fincher wanted text messages to appear as text bubbles with a pale blue or grey background to differentiate them rather than having close-ups of phones. Showrunner Willimon proposed stylising the bubbles as captions, showing Fincher clips from *Sherlock* which depicts texts as white subtitles within the screen. Fincher was reportedly disappointed that the aesthetic had been executed already but decided to use it anyway (Figure 21). It was in fact, merely a modernised update of a convention⁷⁸ repurposed by Paul McGuigan, who also directed the pilot episode of *Scandal*. These onscreen direct textual interfaces with viewers add another layer of visual texture to the programme, complementing the audiovisual direct address to viewers. However, *House of Cards* incorporates another mode of direct address to the audience from the BBC version.

⁷⁸ The use of onscreen text is not itself novel. While silent films mostly used intertitles as these were both technically easier to produce and more dramatically effective than subtitles in the absence of a soundtrack to establish timing continuity, by the 1920s, overlaying text on a scene for dramatic effect was firmly established (Pearson, 1996). Following the silent film era, foreign language films translated dialogue, signage and documents in subtitles. Moreover, while not common in narrative films, educational motion pictures have long incorporated aspects of onscreen overlaid text. Films like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986) can be regarded as a satire on such films.

6.2.1 Breaking the Fourth Wall

Though promoted as a political thriller, *House of Cards* rarely deploys the spying motif found in *Homeland* or *Scandal*, instead turning spying into a directive by those characters controlling the levers of power in the executive branch, keeping them at a distance far removed from the perpetration of the act itself. As asserted in the previous analysis chapters, one of the most salient attributes of television is its ability to integrate extant artistic practices into its very materiality, be it the skeuomorphic camera in *Scandal*, the chiaroscuro colour scheme in *Homeland* or the Greek and Roman mythological references in both, respectively. This remains true in *House of Cards*, which appropriates from theatre its most glaring narrative device: breaking the fourth wall.

This convention is especially significant because it increases the aesthetic distance between viewer and programme, erecting another mediating layer of screen texture^[LT81]. The uncomfortable feeling of being watched affected by spying is different^[LT82] than *Homeland* or *Scandal*, but it is not as innocuous as it serves to causally relate the lead characters' interiority as commentary on their motivation. To break the fourth wall, most of the scenes where there is an explicit monologue to the viewers are shot with two cameras: one in front of Frank (or Claire), and 'one positioned to the side of Kevin Spacey, or over his shoulder. "There is a ballet [to balancing attention between the two]," says Fincher, "it's not as easy as Kevin makes it look'" (Radford, 2014: 6).

In *House of Cards*, only Frank breaks the fourth wall until the season four finale when Claire turns and glares squarely into the camera in a medium close-up shot after she and Frank decide to declare war against the electorate and the political class using fear and terror

in a bid to win Frank a second term as President, though they both on occasion stare directly into the camera with a knowing look without saying anything. In Chapter 63, Claire takes a break from stalking about the White House looking for Frank and directly addresses the implied viewer. She tells us ‘Just to be clear, it’s not that I haven’t always known you were there. But I question your intentions and I’m ambivalent about attention’. And from the last two words uttered in season five: ‘my turn,’ which explicitly shifted *House of Cards*’ POV from Frank’s to Claire’s, to her utterance ‘It’s going to be different for you and me. I’m going to tell you the truth’ in the season six premiere, she immediately discredits Frank as an unreliable narrator and forces us to rethink (and perhaps re-watch) the entire series, though it is unclear at this point what exactly she is referring to.

When Frank and Claire break the fourth wall, (under Willimon’s and Fincher’s conception of the metaphysical televisual space and maintaining fidelity with the UK version) they do not materially interact with or address us as a ‘virtual’ audience. Rather,



Figure 22 – Claire and Frank break the fourth wall (Chapter 52)

they are enacting metaleptic breaks that punctuate the narrative in an *aside ad spectatores* that is designed to inform the audience about the background to the dramatic situation and their plans (Figure 22). This creates a level of anticipatory suspense for impending events and gives viewers a feeling of superiority for having an informational advantage over the victims of the intrigue (Pfister, 1991: 140).

Through this aside, *House of Cards* negates the naturalist and realist pretences of the programme to bring our attention pointedly to its own artifice while simultaneously fulfilling several functions: creating accomplices of viewers as co-constructors of truth in television, as Frank and Claire seek to share their strategies with the viewers and make them complicit though we as viewers are never quite certain they are telling the truth or merely telling us what they want us to believe. It also confirms their principal agency as lead protagonists, as they alone can convince the viewer to play along with them despite our awareness of their intentions.

The aside is also used to assert a range of emotions, from disgust, anger, frustration and even honesty. As they seemingly confess their misdeeds or will to power to the viewers even if they lack the insight to recognise their errors of judgement (conversely, the direct address could be a mistaken expression of the assessment of the diegetic developments); and conveying a notion of stillness. When they make eye contact with the camera, they are enacting a narrative pause as ‘a moment of reflection that arrests or stands apart from the forward motion of the narrative’ (Brown, 2012: 17). This gives viewers a moment to reconsider what has happened previously in the relevant scene and attempt to deduce from their comments what will soon transpire.

The main difference between Claire's and Frank's direct address is that, according to Wright and Frank Pugliese (producer and writer since 2015),

No matter what he was unveiling, sharing or lying about, [Frank] was campaigning for your attention and for your loyalty. And Claire is saying, 'Not only am I going to tell you the truth, but I'm going to let you know how vulnerable I am as well. How scared I am sometimes.' And pose questions to their audience and want their help. (Strause, 2018: 13)

Asides are not uncommon in film and television though they are not used to the same extent as they are in other forms of cultural media such as theatre productions and literary works.⁷⁹ Apart from autoethnographic accounts in research, metafictional asides, especially in audiovisual narrative media have the tendency to suspend the fiction and points to its own constructedness. After the Netflix production was released, BBC re-edited their version and Dobbs rewrote passages to incorporate elements from the US *House of Cards* (Kirch, 2014).

6.2.2 Rebeginning with Adaptations

Though marketed as Netflix's original series, *House of Cards* is an adaptation of the BBC miniseries of the same name by Andrew Davies.⁸⁰ Initially broadcast in 1990 over four episodes during the collapse of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, the UK *House of Cards* follows Chief Whip of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons Frank Urquhart (Ian

⁷⁹ Video games frequently break the fourth wall when the avatar requests information for the player, though Steven Conway, writing for *Gamasutra*, suggests that in video games, many purported examples of breaking the fourth wall are actually better understood as *relocations* of the fourth wall or expansions of the fictional game world to encompass the player (2009). This contrasts with traditional fourth wall breaks, which break the audience's suspension of disbelief by acknowledging them directly. It is perhaps not surprising that Frank chooses to play video games every day when he returns home from the capital, shouting at the television screen as he is fully immersed in the imaginative play. Graphic novel characters such as Deadpool from Marvel comics routinely break the fourth wall in a comedic metanarrative on the action and their own constructedness. Other exceptions include children's television programmes, sitcoms, and reality television.

⁸⁰ See Cardwell's *Andrew Davies* (2005) for an exhaustive treatment of Davies' oeuvre.

Richardson) as he and wife Elizabeth (Diane Fletcher) vie to enter No. 10 Downing Street. Comparatively short as a mini-serial format, it is the first in a trilogy (before *To Play the King* (1993) and *The Final Cut* (1995)). Strangely like how modern UK parties remain riven by Brexit and party infighting, the series presents Frank leading a fractured Tory party more concerned with preserving their grip on power than developing beneficial policy and properly governing their constituents. In fact, Davies adapted his series from the novel *House of Cards* (1989) by Conservative Parliamentarian Michael Dobbs, a book which critically rebuked the UK government, incisively satirising how political authority is often exercised with a ‘sheer lack of humanity’ (Fielding, 2014: 228).

Though the US *House of Cards* is, therefore, an adaptation of an adaptation that maintains some fidelity to the UK series, there are notable differences. In both programmes Frank is portrayed as a Machiavellian character whose slippery tongue both precipitates and ameliorates difficult political situations, though mean-spirited Urquhart is a classical villain while the affable Underwood is more of an antihero. Indeed, Urquhart is framed as the antediluvian and malevolent lead with a coterie of lackeys trembling in his wake, and Elizabeth playing little more than a minor, albeit despicable, role. She does not receive plot parity with Frank as a complicit partner but is a merely ornamental figure used to espouse nasty judgemental comments, normally resulting in a chilling response from Frank. Claire on the other hand, shares narrative parity as part of a power couple, who equally dominates the screen with the gravitas of a coldly plotting Lady Macbeth in a compelling ‘mix of entrancement and horror’ (Walden, 2005: 6). The novels are written in a third-person voice, so Frank and Elizabeth never speak directly to readers as he does in both programmes.

Both television series use the technique of direct address whereby the lead protagonists break the fourth wall by looking straight into the camera and speaking directly to viewers, going unnoticed by the other characters surrounding them. But this technique is deployed differently in the two versions of *House of Cards*. When Urquhart breaks the fourth wall, his exposition slyly invites viewers to adopt his scheming perspective by offering straightforward explanation of his interiority. When Underwood addresses the audience directly, he is pedagogically clarifying his strategy, usually foreshadowing his actions so that we are implicated in *House of Cards*' narrative trajectory. Tonally, given the shorter duration of the British version, its brisk pacing makes it dense, punchier and more satirical while the US version is darker, serious and more melodramatic.

When the US version of *House of Cards* began generating traction in the news media and television industry following the confirmed attachment of Fincher and Spacey to the project and Netflix officially green-lighting the production at a cost of \$100 million, several events occurred, to capitalise on the fresh publicity but to modify its continuity with Dobbs' novel trilogy (Delledonne, 2018). Firstly, the novel series was re-released but not before names were changed to align them with characters in the UK version or omitted altogether; for example, Tim Stamper, (whose name was Doug Stamper in the US version) was edited out of the books. In this new revised edition, Frank now makes epigraphic asides to the reader at the beginning of each chapter, a direct result of the television series since neither the aside nor any 'Chapters' existed in the original novels.

While *Homeland* and *Scandal* depict American politics as the necessary securitisation of the nation and the protection of the Republic as existential political crises, respectively, *House of Cards* is a programme purely about the pursuit of political power. *House of Cards*

also adapts themes of betrayal, manipulation and indiscriminate utilitarianism from *Richard III* (Shakespeare, c. 1606). Accordingly, this political thriller is a tragic story about the sacrifice of people (whom they mostly see as dispensable) the Underwoods willingly make to maintain complete control. *House of Cards* adapts the scheming and revenge of the Renaissance characters to the modern setting of Washington D.C, replete with characters vying for the throne (plotting to assume the Presidency), engaging in court intrigue (manipulating Congressional members against one another through obfuscation and prevarication), culminating in the fall of the king (when President Walker's (Michel Gill) shady dealings are exposed, he is publicly disgraced due to his moral public persona and forced to resign, leaving Frank to be sworn in as President).

Since this executive power and the bureaucratic mechanisms privileging selective access in legislative lobbying are arcane to the typical American citizen, setting *House of Cards* in nominally known but ineffable and labyrinthian government institutions. Viewers can then be both cognitively riveted by the novel political nomenclature while remaining removed from the realist pretensions of the narrative in recognition of its fictive dramaturgical embellishment. Finally, the most subtle adaptation from Shakespeare is the depiction of sexuality. The open marriage of the Underwoods and the bisexual backstory of Frank is revealed in season two when he reunites with his West Point acapella group for a library renaming ceremony in season two, chapter eight. Three episodes later, he has a threesome with Claire and their Secret Service bodyguard. *House of Cards* alludes to the royal courts of the Renaissance where sexual liaisons were socially acceptable amongst the powerful so long as they remained discreet while public exposure of such affairs was often used to discredit their adversaries [LT84](Harris et al., 2007). Presently, the norms of secrecy in

contemporary American politics are formalised by diplomacy and personified by the Secretary of State who works with the powerful elite. They are protected by a populace denied transparency and deliberately left in the dark about the data extracted from state surveillance as political leverage against their adversaries.

Accordingly, the moral conflict of our protagonists is subsumed under their conception of complete control. Viewers are under no apprehension that Claire and Frank are altruistic politicians; any such notions are disabused by the body counts they accrue over the seasons and the relationships they destroy for political expediency and ruthless pragmatism. Frank plainly posits their moral compass as a route of contingent collateral damage by claiming ‘the road to power is paved with hypocrisy, and casualties’ (Chapter 22). Their preference for blending coercive power with violence legitimised by the authority of the Presidential office to incite fear and spread misinformation demonstrates there is little difference between the perception of power and control of political discourse in *House of Cards*.

6.2.3 Netflix

Of course, this chapter would be inadequate without considering the role that Netflix has played in the success of *House of Cards*. An online distribution platform, Netflix entered the film and television ecology in 1997 (with Reed Hastings and March Randolph at the helm) as a delivery service that allowed customers to swap DVDs for as long as they wished, provided they paid their monthly subscription. Then in 2012, Netflix changed its business model and began distributing exclusive media content starting with its acquisition of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s Norwegian-American dramatic programme

Lilyhammer (2012-2015). However, it was not until 2013 that Netflix commissioned original content from head screenwriter and showrunner Beau Willimon, alongside Spacey, director/producer David Fincher and studio Media Rights Capital.

Although it has since transformed its US postal-based delivery business model into a media acquisition powerhouse in addition to creating its own content with over 206 million paying subscribers worldwide (over 73 million in the US alone) (Netflix, 2021), it is debatable whether Netflix would have been as successful had it not capitalised on the shift in viewing habits heralded by the then nascent Internet. In what Amanda Lotz calls ‘the post-network era’ (2018), people were no longer restricted to reading the *TV Guide* (or regional equivalent) and choosing which television programmes or films they wanted to watch depending on their preferences. These were solely determined by the directors of network programming, whose primary motive remained profit maximisation (Kind, Nilssen and Sogard, 2006) not edification, entertainment and rarely, if ever for aesthetic appreciation save perhaps nature documentaries like David Attenborough’s *Our Planet* (Netflix, 2019)).

At present, the Internet gives viewers the freedom to be not just a mere consumer of media content but also creators of content personalised for diverse subsets of the world population (i.e., YouTube, Vimeo, Amazon, etc.). While it does not ‘reinvent the wheel’ with a business strategy that uses its customers’ data to market them similar products to the ones they already enjoy, Netflix pushes back against the popular belief that viewers’ attention spans are waning. In fact, its success proves that viewers crave television that can keep them engrossed for as long as possible with one executive explicitly stating that Netflix’s biggest competitor is sleep (Bradley, 2019). The production values of *House of Cards* derive from the alignment of the producers, directors, set designers, cinematographers and scriptwriters’

creative imagination. It also is actuated by Netflix executives' insistence on the maintenance of the distribution channel's corporate brand, their secretive algorithmic model and the massive capital at their disposal. Netflix also increases the expectation of people to engage with media content that they really feel like watching rather than what is incidentally available at a given time on broadcast television^[LT85].

6.2.3.1 An Algorithmic Aesthetic

Netflix has tapped into this desire for more personalised content and has purchased, licensed or commissioned film and television programmes from every conceivable genre. Netflix's^[LT86] Amazon Web Services (AWS) architecture is noted for its vast 'computing and storage needs, including databases, analytics, recommendation engines, and video transcoding, using more than 100,000 server instances' (Amazon, 2021). Netflix has fundamentally changed the way people watch television by poaching existing television producers and well-known creatives from existing studios with enormous sums of money and developing algorithms of taste that exploit rampant consumerism.⁸¹

Finally turning a profit in 2020,⁸² Netflix has successfully transformed streaming from the act of choosing *what* we watch into an act of *how* we watch using data-driven

⁸¹ The success of Rhimes's production company Shondaland has led to a multimillion-dollar contract with Netflix. Already, her first Netflix series *Bridgerton* (2021-present) has earned \$40 million in bonus pay. This is in addition to the millions in production fees she receives annually for her broadcast network series (Berg, 2021).

⁸² This is partly due to the enforced lockdowns of the global Covid-19 pandemic during which Netflix added 8.5 million customers in the fourth quarter, for a total of 203.6 million paying subscribers by the end of 2020 (Lee, 2021). They also expect to add six million more subscribers in the first quarter of 2021, though these figures are not yet publicly available. By the end of 2020, Netflix achieved a positive cash flow of \$25 billion in revenue with \$11.8 billion generated for original content and \$.5 billion in licensing contracts (Netflix Company Filing, 2021).

programming to tailor content. Finn (2016) argues that Netflix precisely calculated subscriber viewer preferences to correctly gamble on the success of *House of Cards* by deploying an algorithmic aesthetic that quantifies a vast array of differences – of colour scheme, onscreen action, music, titles, duration and narrative content – so that ‘issues of quality or hierarchy get transposed into fit^{LT87}’ (Finn, 2016: 89) as matching the tastes of subscribers as determined by their viewing history.

So certain were they of their ‘Big Data’ metrics that when Netflix approached *Spacey*, executives said ‘We believe in you. We’ve run our data and it tells us that our audience would watch this series’ (Wu, 2015: 4), because the Netflix proprietary algorithm statistically showed that the British *House of Cards* was ‘popular with Netflix users as were political thrillers, Fincher’s *Fight Club* and *The Social Network*, and *Spacey*, who has starred in a range of movies, including *Se7en* (a Fincher film)’ (Auletta, 2014: 28). As a result, Netflix did not have to spend millions on advertising and marketing because it already had a secret database of recommendations and preferences for its millions of subscribers, although it still spent upwards of \$100 million on production at the time (US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 2014).

Netflix instead promoted *House of Cards* to its customers with ten highly targeted trailers (Roettgers, 2013) that featured Kevin Spacey for *Spacey* fans, artistic shots for the Fincher fans, and scenes featuring female characters for viewers who had watched content with strong female leads, making *House of Cards* ‘an algorithmically produced show not just in its initial framing but in its production and rollout’ (Finn, 2016: 4). The algorithmic personalisation that Netflix envisions as the future of television constantly spies on and collates viewers’ behaviour as statistical data to the extent that it actuates the feeling of being

watched that *Scandal* and *Homeland* stimulate. With *House of Cards*, being watched is no longer a metaphorical theme or implied narrative plot point but a real fact.

House of Cards relies heavily on a complex and long storytelling format to keep viewers riveted and awake. Briefly alluded to earlier is the concept of a dramatic vehicle that is more like a long film than discrete television episodes. After deciding they wanted to create an adaptation of BBC's *House of Cards*, Fincher et al. shopped around for a network that would allow them to tell the story, but they all declined to make any firm commitments without a pilot (Hooton, 2015). However, based on their algorithmic assessment, Netflix agreed to two full seasons (that is twenty-six hours of edited screen time) before a single frame was shot (Vankin, 2013). This allowed Fincher and his team to develop a long story without any interference from network executives to stymie their creative considerations, resulting in 'a sophisticated multi-layer story with complex characters who would reveal themselves over time' (Smith and Telang, 2013: 4).

6.2.3.2 Hyperserialisation

In terms of distribution, another new Netflix outcome is the release of the entire season's episodes at the same time. Netflix's main online competitors, streaming services like Amazon, Hulu and Disney+, have much belatedly followed suit in releasing all episodes of new original television content simultaneously (though this does vary depending on the series), though this is still not the case with premium cable providers like HBO or Showtime. This shift in content distribution may be defined as hyperserialisation, a term coined by Vince Gillian (creator of *Breaking Bad*) in an interview with *Newsweek*, which he characterised as

a new mode of television storytelling that entails a ‘purer, more intense focus on one linear series-long plot line’ (Romano, 2013: par. 50).

The nature of such ‘binge worthy’⁸³ narrative immersion practically anticipates that viewers will want to watch the entire season as a collective chunk and distinguishes itself from episodic television in which episodes are frequently seen as self-contained with their own narrative trajectory and resolution. Serial programming is common in dramatic and soap television (and much earlier radio) programming with its elongated story arcs; however, the excessive serialisation we find on *House of Cards* (and other Netflix original series) is structurally embedded within the viewing apparatus of the user interface so that viewers can control the duration of the experience rather than having to follow a pre-determined schedule. While the exercise of this (illusion of) control demands a more dedicated time commitment to the programme, it also invites a prolonged, appreciative immersion that viewers were thrilled to avail themselves of. Willimon actively encouraged this perspective, stating ‘you don’t even have to think of it as television. And none of us did. For us, it was a 13-hour movie’ (Romano, 2013, par. 45).

House of Cards is famously the first Netflix programme to be released in this manner and its success has made hyperserialisation a key component of Netflix’s distribution model, though some licensed programmes like *Berlin Station* (Epix, 2019 – present) follow a more traditional weekly-released schedule. Since viewers are now watching for longer, increased complexity is required to keep them engaged. Structuring the schedule with long story arcs also means that ‘television as a whole, at least on the drama side [is] veering toward this

⁸³ The term ‘binge-watch’ officially entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicon in 2018, defining it as ‘to watch multiple episodes of (a television programme) consecutively or in rapid succession’.

hyper-serialization [and] necessitates being a little secretive' (Weintraub, 2014) in the production process so as not to spoil the experience for inquisitive fans.

Even though *House of Cards* also has minor episodic arcs, it follows traditional serial form: episodes cannot be viewed in isolation as viewers would be missing too much crucial information from previous episodes to follow them coherently. These episodic arcs are primarily used for complex background character development, such as in season one, chapter four when Claire returns to her mother's home and her backstory is revealed. Additionally, *House of Cards* layers other literary strategies of serialisation to intensify viewer experience, particularly with symbolism, the deferred appearance of significant characters, longer and more convoluted storylines requiring recapitulation and active memory recall for viewers, and the breaking of the fourth wall. According to Mittell, such narrative complexity is a key, though not necessarily sufficient, element in the assignation of 'quality' to television (2015), and *House of Cards* has it in spades.

Since the producers and creators had free rein, they were able to push the intersecting boundaries of conventional storytelling and technology. Moreover, hyperseriality is about 'rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form' Mittell, 2015: 18) and focusing more on characterisation (direct form for Claire and Frank, indirect for everyone else). In *House of Cards*, 'the viewer accepts the pseudo-diegetic narrator [Claire and Frank] as if [they] were not only a creation, but first and foremost, a creator' (Ferenz, 2005: 151). Since Wright and Spacey are in fact producers in this reality, the boundaries of fact and fiction become so blurred that we come to see this metafictional aside as 'the major force that fuels the story' (Klarer, 2014: 211).

The narrative is further complicated by the introduction of numerous characters and political subplots in the first episode ‘Chapter 1’. Myth arcs⁸⁴ in the form of the journalist characters’ (Tom Hammerschmidt, Lucas Goodwin and Janine Skorsky) investigations to expose the terrible acts (of corruption, malfeasance and eventually murder) perpetrated by Frank and Claire are themselves compounded by the unexplained disappearance and sudden reappearance of various characters over the seasons. Accordingly, the casual viewer is unable to ascertain these characters’ importance unless they can consciously recall them. That said, the optional director commentary exclusively on Netflix (and not available in the DVD box set) for season one provides insight into Fincher’s vision and the style he was going for. His use of ‘forced memory recall’ was integrated into the series (as recaps are not present when watching the programme on Netflix apart from a three-minute recap at the beginning of season two) and illustrates its creators’ confidence in its long-term viewers. Willimon explains ‘we always assume that we’ve got a smart audience that has a good memory, that we don’t have to repeat a lot and we don’t have to infuse it with artificial cliff-hangers at every turn’ (Griffiths, 2015).

The extensive character arcs and protracted subplots that intersect and span the entire series may well confuse the lay viewer who happens upon *House of Cards* but they compel long-term viewers to pay close attention, as the significance of narrative details take a long time to play out. *House of Cards* does not coddle with heavy-handed exposition of character

⁸⁴ Myth arcs are ‘questions that form the mythology...which is present throughout the series. The myth arc, once established, is only occasionally alluded to. Other shows...use the myth arc as the driving force for the narrative, but again only make occasion direct references...They are subtle but important references that provide a sense of completion and closure, with the audience rewarded for their investment in the series’ premise’ (Lacey and McElroy, 2012). The other myth arc in *House of Cards* revolves around the unorthodox, unholy union between Frank and Claire. A minor myth arc in the form of socio-political commentary about the political milieu is taken for granted as understood.

motives (the asides discreetly offer access only to Claire's and Frank's) but invites us to actively speculate and make sense of them with very little in the way of narrative devices to assist us (though there are moments of recapitulation, such as when Frank subjunctively recounts his various murders to the Secretary of State, or when Claire attempts to get Doug to take the fall for her crimes).

When action is foreshadowed, it is accomplished so subtly, it can easily go unnoticed even by an attentive viewer. One might notice elements such as the costuming and colour scheme that were revamped in season six to give Claire a more militaristic look as she went to battle against her foes and to surround her in even more grey. Given *House of Cards*' skilful weaving together of numerous narrative threads and the format of Netflix that seamlessly connects episodes, viewers are compelled to 'rewatch [the series] in order to notice the depths of references, to marvel at the display of craft and continuities, and to appreciate details that require the liberal use of pause and rewind' (Mittell, 2015: 38).

6.3 The Wright Claire Underwood

House of Cards strange storytelling strategy of deliberately keeping viewers at a distance from Claire effectively instils a desire to want to know more about her. Moreover, that the severe restriction of close-up shots is reserved for those rare but salient moments of uncertain and broken humanity contrasts with her otherwise coolly composed political personas is what makes her arguably one of the most chilling portrayals of antiheroism on television. The close-ups occur more frequently in season six, especially when Claire makes a direct address. It is never an extreme close-up, though; letting viewers too close would

break with the characterisation and structural continuity of the programme established over years.

Wright performs Claire with a regal and minimalist expressivity showcasing a steeliness that she effortlessly channels. A foil to Spacey's charismatic and boisterous Frank, Claire is eerily cool and collected, her every word and gesture carefully measured to convey an implacable quietude of impulse control. Her performance purposefully creates a complex character who Wright describes as not simply 'evil and cunning [but] utilitarian and efficient' (Kashner, 2015: 11). She imbues *House of Cards* with a muted elegance that is as sleek as it is unsettling.

Claire is a character who has a talent for selectively using lies to give an impression of truth, so that she is regarded publicly as sincere and even sympathetic while privately scheming. Indeed, she represents the double standard, humiliation and face-saving compromises women often face when confronted with facts about their sexuality. For example, in Chapter 16 she is harangued in a live televised interview about her position on abortion and is cornered into revealing she has had three. Of course, she fudges the truth and said one was the result of rape to divert attention from her sexual freedom to the rapist and to generate viewer sympathy without having to bear the social shame of simply not wanting to have children.^[LT88] As discussed in previous chapters, the lack of a maternal instinct is a key aspect of antiheroism, alongside justifiable criminality. This caricature of feminist ideology of choice between family or career is handled deftly in *House of Cards*. Though she does not openly despise children as Frank does, she is unapologetic about her decisions to freely explore her sexuality rejecting the right-wing conservative Christian edicts controlling and

regulating female sexuality ‘to be fruitful and multiply the earth’ (Genesis 1:28) in lieu of a self-serving, power-seeking agency.

But what makes Claire so compelling is the way that Wright inverts conventional melodramatic expressivity as demonstrable of truthful interiority into a steely, anti-melodramatic performance. Its excess resides in the complete control of her comportment and voice. Even when she demands ‘I want you to fuck me Francis’ in, Chapter 39, Wright’s vocalisations are never hysterical or effusive to signify enflamed sexual desire. Her monotone delivery gently quivers with a hidden but human desire for connection behind the facade of staged diplomatic protocols and state summits. While Spacey’s boisterous Frank is more conventionally melodramatic with his emphatic southern drawl, Wright’s Claire has a curt General American diction despite her hailing from Texas. Evoking the manipulation of Lady Macbeth, she glacially transforms Claire from the supporting wife who resents putting her own ambitions on hold into a shrewd and calculating President, embodying a subversive antiheroine whose sole motive is cold, hard power.

Since starring in the soap opera *Santa Barbara* (NBC, 1984-1993) to her more recent film appearances in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) or *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017) that demonstrate a much wider range of affect, Wright’s performance should not be construed as ‘flat’ or wooden but as deliberate style of acting conveying the sense of Claire’s withholding and her disregard for those around her besides their utilitarian exploitation. Claire’s slow and deliberate voice is attuned to her emotional detachment and her need to keep her cards ‘close to her chest’. Indeed, her dismissive vocalisations mask her true intent of consolidating power, even at the expense of undercutting Frank’s actions.

Claire is depicted as Frank's affective foil with an opacity that feels controlled. During those rare moments, such as in Chapter 15 when she is told by First Lady Walker (Joanna Going) that she is good person, Claire later bursts into tears before regaining her composure. Whether the outpouring is Claire's own self-assessment that she is not a good person or that her public persona is effective, what is significant is that she only cries because she is alone. Seen as a vulnerability, the shift in register is completely unexpected. She even conceals her true emotional state from Frank, throwing up in Chapter 28 after decrying that she has sacrificed her own ambition to 'be significant' in furthering his career over her own. Claire's stiff physicality is an organic extension of her character's practiced duplicity and accounts for the chilling frisson of her predatory radiance.

It is her measured taciturnity and subdued gestures^[LT89] that make Claire feel so alien to viewers. She impels viewers to reevaluate melodrama itself by constructing a contrast between expressivity and stoicism as anti-melodramatic. As such, Wright's contained performance is not merely figurative but emblematic of Claire's duplicitous interiority^[LT90], complicating her characterisation as viewers are invited to also sympathise with Claire as a victim of political theatre by showing how her immobility coincides with the progression of her moral decay^[LT91]. Our allegiance with Claire becomes pleasurable when her extremely distasteful antiheroine traits are unapologetically self-asserted, as she does repeatedly in her asides during the last season. She luxuriates in her unscrupulous deceptions; it is a strange kind of pleasure since every action is dedicated to the scrupulous fabrication of her legitimacy as President. As she assumes command of the country, the melodramatic maintenance of Claire's immoral performance (as opposed to Wright's performance of Claire's immorality) as a victim of Frank's misdeeds prompts us to admire her performance rather than critique her schemes.

The breaking of the fourth wall establishes that Claire is performing for viewers and makes us complicit in her descent into immorality. Rhetorically, this device both transmutes the negativity of deception into entertainment and transmits this energy as pleasurable by disengaging our normative morality and positions viewers as subjects who appreciate her actions as a kind of performance art. In her recognition of the camera's omnipresence, Claire implies her desire to impress us aesthetically rather than condemn her morally. In this sense, the position of 'viewer' and 'narrative accomplice' become fused so that we accept Claire's asides as complicit viewers. So enthralled with the efficacy of her arrogance, egoism and seasoned duplicity, we imaginatively share in Claire's distorted vision of power by enacting an appreciative relationship that simulates the values of an amoral subject. Thus, *House of Cards*' direct address blurs the boundaries of performance and by acknowledging itself as fiction by pointing to the symbiotic relationship between viewers and the programme, pulling us into the work of art and giving us a glimpse into her interiority which she has concealed for long.



Figure 23 – promotional still for *House of Cards* season 6 (Netflix, 2018)

In a publicity still for the final season (Figure 23), Wright is seated upon a marblesque throne glaring at the camera. The imagery is stolen (that is, appropriated for artistic purposes) directly from the imposing Lincoln statue located in the centre of the columnated self-same memorial in Washington D.C. The use of this familiar monument plays with the national consciousness of American viewers by evoking its Civil War associations and concepts of the Republic, patriotism and the self-possessed, quiet, deliberative and resolute power of one man with the images of Claire (and previously Frank). Such imagery is iconic and powerful. The posing foreshadows an increase in her calculated aggression as she now openly has blood on her hands.

This is most curious because although we know Claire is cold and self-interested, she never resorts to physical violence, instead relying on quiet manipulation and steely cunning. Yet when she decides that she must eliminate Tom Yates⁸⁵ in Chapter 64 because she feels he knows too much about the Underwoods' raw and vulnerable sides, which could prove troublesome for them in the future, she murders him by quietly slipping poison into his drink and then watching him die while they are having sex and he is confessing his true love for her. This 'clean' homicide is not the work of a butcher though she now (that is, in season six) does metaphorically and, by the series finale, literally have blood dripping from her fingertips. It seems appropriate then that the season's tagline is 'behind every great man is a woman with blood on her hands'.

⁸⁵ The writer hired by Frank to produce a book detailing the philosophical underpinning of his controversial 'America Works' jobs programme who ultimately becomes entangled in deeply emotional and sexual affair with Claire as he shadowed the President and First Lady.

6.3.1 Stuck in Stilettos

While Claire may now figuratively have blood on her hands, she has not pointedly stepped in it, metaphorically speaking. Just as Olivia's attire gestures to her interiority, it is similarly instructive to consider Claire's high heeled stilettos⁸⁶ as critical to the contemplation of Claire's characterisation on *House of Cards*. As a cultural artefact, high heels possess a history that imbues them with associations and purposes that are often ignored or have become hidden over time. Semmelback (2015) asserts that high heels were worn by both male and females in Renaissance Europe to signify their wealth by physically elevating them above the poor working classes who could not afford to wear, let alone purchase, such ostentatious and impractical footwear during their everyday lives. Contemporary stilettos have the thinnest (but not necessarily the highest) of heels with a steep arch tapering to a point measuring at least 10 cm to upwards of 25 cm in length with a diameter at the ground base of less than 1 cm (Cox, 2004), though even this definition is contentious and variable.

The English word comes from the same Italian word for a needle-like weapon and denotes the 'short dagger with a blade thick in proportion to its breadth' (D'Angelo, 2016: 38) favoured by Venetian mercenaries. It entered the American lexicon as a phobic catch-all for the danger posed by Italians in general who were then regarded as dangerous low-class migrants. In its original sense, there was no gendered distinction for the stiletto even when used strictly as a weapon, whether it was being employed as decorative hatpin or an even deadlier hairpin concealed by a femme fatale to stealthily dispatch her intended victim.

⁸⁶ Interestingly, in *Veep* (HBO, 2012-2019), in a running gag throughout the seasons, when that other television female in the White House, President Selena Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), is alone she immediately takes off her heels. In her offices and at home she remains barefoot, only reluctantly donning her shoes when she has a public event or someone important visits.

As stilettos migrated from the hands of men to a genderless head and finally to the feet of women, it is not surprising, especially given ‘the conflation of the stiletto as dagger and as heel type...permeated the North American imagination at the turn of the twentieth century’ (D’Angelo, 2016: 40), so much so that we now recognise its fetishist appellation as a sexual weapon. Even though Claire is not a femme fatale in the conventional sense, she possesses many of its characteristics which locate her as an antiheroine – and her stiletto heels play an important part in that characterisation.



Figure 24 – Cropped image of Claire’s posture whilst sitting and wearing stilettos (Chapter 43)

From the very first chapter in season one until the series closing credits, Claire wears stiletto heels for every occasion, whether she is in public or in the privacy of her own home. Even when she returns to Dallas to kill her ailing mother in Chapter 49, she declines to wear flat shoes, as though her mother would be evaluating her footwear while reeling from chemotherapy treatment and trying to keep the nausea and sickness at bay. The obvious

exceptions to this are when she is in bed or when she goes on one of her many jazz-infused runs. As Claire begins to assume greater screen time over the seasons, her stilettos become permanent, however impractical and painful, save a scene at the end of season four when she removes a shoe to bandage a bloodied toe.

Claire's comportment and gait in *House of Cards* are governed by the stilettos which impede her movement; they are an extension of and act as a sartorial short-hand for her own interiority.⁸⁷ She feels small and often impotent in Frank's shadow, hence the desire to be seen as taller and more imposing. She walks deliberately, slowly and precipitously, not merely because she comes from a privileged background or because she is prepossessed of a sadomasochistic streak but also because the stilettos strictures entrap, contain and compel her so. While her gait exudes an entitled confidence and bearing, it is also measured and guarded as stilettos demand such a high level of attention to ensure one does not topple over on an unseen impediment in the ground. It is a testament to the way the stiletto is constructed: its slender shape seems almost too delicate and its precarious slope too dangerous to be capable of stable support, let alone whilst striding endlessly around on floors polished to a treacherous shine.

So as each step brings Claire closer to her goals, so each step threatens with serious mortal danger to the perception of her body she has worked so hard to cultivate. That her stilettos *must* cause supreme discomfort but are not removed evinces a stoic feminine

⁸⁷ Olivia Pope too wore stilettos exclusively from season four (except when filming during Washington's two pregnancies) in *Scandal* because, now having committed murder, she was 'the new Olivia [who] was so good at what she does, she didn't need to be grounded' (Smith, 2014) according to *Scandal's* costume designer Lyn Paolo. However, her gait was more pronounced and even comical, not at all like Claire's slow, serious and sure-footed amble. As a CIA agent who spends much of the day running around 'in the field,' Carrie never wears stilettos on *Homeland* until the series finale 'Prisoners of War' (a nod to the original Israeli series) when she goes to a jazz concert in Moscow.

aesthetic, one that values appearance over practicality or pain and which remains the sole purview of those who do not have to actually engage in any strenuous physical activity (menial work) or movement.⁸⁸ This visual effect is one of the principal consequences of wearing stilettos – the elevated and condescending height ‘sensuously alters the whole anatomy - foot, leg, thigh, hips, pelvis, breasts...[and] alters the angle of the buttocks by 20 or 30 degrees to create a more youthful and thus fertile-looking body’ (Betts, 2008: 15) and allows Claire to pointedly challenge the gendered ideal of the stiletto with its thin heel as symbolic of a delicate and even precarious woman.

Owing to her vertiginous heels, Claire’s über-erect posture projects a placid power. It is a power play that is shared with the other female characters on *House of Cards*. From her (and her dead husband’s) nemesis Secretary of State Heather Dunbar (Elizabeth Marvel) to her confidant and campaign manager LeAnn Harvey (Neve Campbell) – both of whom she dispatches when they no longer served her purposes – these women all don daggers to make their point, to complete their suit of professional armour in the high-stakes and male-dominated world of politics. But while the other female characters are at least afforded the quiet luxury of exchanging their heels for flat shoes in their down-time, Claire’s stilettos are ever present. It is as if she feels she must present this persona of power whether in public or in private. In a sense, Claire behaves as if she is always being watched and is always on

⁸⁸ Such optics are not restricted to the realm of fiction. One need look no further than former First Lady Melania Trump and so-called presidential advisor and daughter Ivanka Trump teetering and tottering their way around Washington and global political theatres in their Louboutin heels. It is no wonder they are unable to string together a coherent defence of the President Trump’s abysmal policies particularly with regards to women’s issues. They are far too focused on finding a straight vector line and following it to their intended destination since ‘for every step you take [in stilettos], you need to have a general awareness of where your heel is being placed’ (Phan, 2013: YouTube *How to Master the High Heel*). Interestingly, the noble and elite classes who would have worn heels, were almost always carried about on litters or lounged on couches as they recognised and admitted the impracticality and pain that inevitably results from walking in heels (Simmelback, 2015).

display so must always ‘keep up appearances’ lest someone observe her fleshy humanity as a soft vulnerability and take it for weakness, a dangerous condition in current American politics and a fatal one in *House of Cards*.

Claire’s stilettos are a potent sartorial metaphor for her own self being squished and squeezed into the narrow space of the feminine expectations placed upon her by American gender norms. That they confine her movement onscreen parallels the numerous ways in which she is underestimated and undermined serves as performative counteroffensive whereby the male gaze is at both exploited and catered to, signalling ‘the taut combination of power and weakness that conservative women must cultivate in order to survive among ideologues’ (Burleigh, 2017: 20) whom they have chosen to remain beholden to. As Garber hypothesises, ‘if Claire’s heels are a form of armor, the [later] episodes of *House of Cards* seem to be suggesting that they are armor that cannot, at this point, be fully removed. The “sheath” and the “she” have merged, perhaps inextricably’ (2014: 11). While born into a world of privilege that afforded her the freedom to forge her own way forward, Claire has chosen to keep herself imprisoned within her stilettos, a fact explicitly attested by her lover, the British photographer Adam Galloway (played by Ben Daniels) in Chapter 10 when they spend a long weekend together.

In a sense, Claire’s stilettos are a sartorial reminder about the sacrifices that she has made (with comfort the placeholder for normative female expectations) on the path to power (symbolised by the stiletto). In *House of Cards*, we have the stiletto functioning as a televisual trope where, by metonymic displacement, the part (stiletto) has come to represent the whole (of Claire and *House of Cards*). Its glaring use in the programme suggests that it imparts one

of its causal aesthetic attributes – stillness – onto Claire whose physicality is representative of one of *House of Cards*' primary stylistic affects.

Despite the sensation of stillness and aesthetic strategies of distance *House of Cards* constructs to establish a detached viewer allegiance with Claire, it is the unreflective viewer that does not question why they enjoy watching her constricted characterisation, especially to the extent we want her to succeed in her endeavours despite her dastardly deeds. In contrast, the impulse to celebrate Claire Underwood as a feminist, or to romanticise her glacial shift towards opaque amorality, illustrates the problematic attitudes of deference toward the powerful, which is to say, an inclination toward power worship that vicariously fetishizes or excuses abuse. Unlike *Scandal* where all the regular female characters exhibit sadistic streaks while still wearing the 'White Hat of Justice', *House of Cards* has several gender normative female characters. For example, the demurring First Lady Walker adheres to the patriarchal value of subservience in her marriage even though she is supremely unhappy. Linda Vasquez, President Walker's competent chief of staff regularly sacrifices her own desires and subsumes her familial obligations despite being routinely dismissed.

Even Rachel Posner (Rachel Brosnahan), the frightened and compassionate prostitute who (albeit unknowingly) is manipulated into facilitating Congressman Russo's alcoholic relapse, remains naively beholden to her captor Doug. When she finally exercises her agency as protest, rather than expeditiously publicly coming forward and protecting herself within the glare of the media spotlight, she merely recedes into the shadows, hiding as a bartender in small New Mexico town. Of course, the apparatus of state surveillance deployed by Doug quickly locates and kills her, burying her body in an isolated expanse off Route 66. Rather than portraying Claire as an aspirational model of postmodern capitalist feminism, *House of*

Cards attenuates her screen time with hollow⁸⁹ musical movements of low bass minor keys that either accentuates or, hopefully, cautions against the callousness in her characterisation. The horned instrumentals are plaintively operatic and devoid of singing, the absence of voices parallels the removal of people in the main title sequence depiction of Washington D.C., reinforcing the lack of humanity at the core of the Underwoods' pursuit of power.

6.3.2 And the Jazz Band Plays On

According to jazz instrumentalist and lead composer Jeff Beal, before a single frame of *House of Cards* had been filmed, he collaborated with Fincher to set up the musical tone of the programme (Greiving, 2015: 2). Beal had previously worked with Fincher on a mobile telephone commercial around five years before storyboarding began on *House of Cards* and expressed a keen desire to renew their collaborative work (Abrams, 2013). While Willimon's early sketches were instrumental in crafting the visual language he envisioned for the programme, according to Beal, to capture the 'sardonic darkness' of the BBC series, they decided on the song by Supertramp's *Crime of the Century* (1974) because

it has this sense of operatic, sort of classicism and gravitas, but it also has a very gritty, earthy and almost jazzier or bluesy kind of imitation of rock 'n roll. As we dissected that together and thought about why that spoke to him, that's the show. The show is all about the underbelly of Washington, the dark corners and what you don't see and what really happens (Hirway, 2014: 2.30)

⁸⁹ In the sense of the horned instruments' slow blowing quality. According to musician John Humphries historical analysis of early horns (2000), the conical shape of traditional horns only allowed for harmonic pitches so two pairs of horns were required to play major and minor keys. This became standardised as a music convention until the advent of valves which introduced chromaticity into its metallic materiality, allowing for tonal differentiation. Like the harmonic opposition of Olivia and Fitz in *Scandal*, *House of Cards* affixes minor and major keys to Claire and Frank; though functionally independent, their complementarity is far more affective.

Returning to his jazz training for the main title sequence, Beal uses a remarkably similar sounding, strong bass line and a cloud of dark electronic music that swirls around the melody, and the energy of the song gradually builds up to its climax. Beal clearly wanted to convey a sense of location and introduce a metaphor of haunted emptiness for the political structures and landmarks in the Capital. The sequence is evocative of the hollowness in the political storyworld with Fincher extracting all the people from them. The pulsing beat over the institutions of Washington, the cacophony of sounds and the electronic rhythms define the darkness that typifies the city's corrupt underbelly. This mixture of elements comes directly from the series' score with Fincher's wanting to infuse it with a surreal quality that makes *House of Cards* feel like a slowly building melange of disorientation and confusion, uncertainty and suspense.

Beal's package fee⁹⁰ allows us to attribute the tone of the series' score primarily to him, particularly because Fincher and Willimon did not give him any specific mandates to follow but trusted him to compose autonomously, apart from periodic reviews. "It was very freeing; this wasn't a paint by the [sic] numbers template I was given to work with," said Beal. "David has great taste and instincts. I took note of when he really liked something. I trusted his ears to bounce ideas' (Galas, 2014). Beal also chose to intersperse delicate the piano movements to give the show a noir sensibility, creating slow, intensely deep and melancholic music that transitions to foreboding musical movements that, while euphonic, suggest something is not right.

⁹⁰ A common arrangement for television and independent film composers which make them responsible for the entire musical creating process, such that they compose, record, mix, overlay and deliver all the music for the project for a single fee.

Fincher agreed this proved to be a good representation of Frank and Claire and it serves as the anchor⁹¹ around which all other instruments would revolve (Galas, 2014). As in *Scandal*, with Olitz (Olivia and Fitz's onscreen 'one minute' sequences), the musical passages when Frank and Claire are together having a 'noir-ish, very dark, romantic, haunting theme' (Tiedemann, 2014) which cements their importance via ambient tonal shifts that slow everything down. This is novel in and of itself, and contrasts with the rapid editing and short shots of *Scandal* and, to a lesser extent *Homeland*, where the pacing is faster with the camera constantly moving to keep viewers excited.

However, the score changes from the second season onwards. It feels watered down, softened so much that we are no longer thrilled at hearing it anymore. This is because 'David [Fincher] saw the second season as even more operatic and darker' than the first (Sejean, 2014). The bass line sounds are toned down to represent how the dark undercurrent that runs pervasively throughout the whole show is slowly shaping the series. There are more stringed accompaniments and horns, giving the score a much more developed but dissonant melody and a tighter movement. The stretching of the music lends a tension to *House of Cards* and is aimed at a kind of savouring, of slowing down and appreciating the look and feel of the programme while creatively negotiating the Trump administration's provision of shocking factual fodder that required writing more outrageous fictional plot points during the story arc of season four.

⁹¹ Richard Bandler, John Grinder and Frank Pucelik were University of California students who further developed Pavlov's classical conditioning into a form of art, calling it Anchoring. When hearing the musical movements, viewers unconsciously associate them with a feeling that something is amiss in relation to the onscreen characters. This was later developed into what is now known as 'neuro linguistic programming' (Grinder and Pucelik, 2013).

6.4 Picturesque Stillness

House of Cards' aesthetic scheme is inarguably cold, dusky and devoid of sentimentality. Just like Wright's character Claire, the look of the programme feels chilly and staged but precisely calibrated to be so. It is quite an achievement to make the drama feel kinetic even when the camera and the actor's blocking is so still and her performance so restrained. The way *House of Cards* is filmed effectively becomes an analogy of the programme itself: there is extremely limited action (defined as having continuous motion including physical stunts, chases, verbal fights, group battles or races rather than merely speaking) that takes place but somehow both the programme and its cinematography keeps viewers engaged and attentive.

This eerie stillness is woven throughout the show. It is there in Frank and Claire's 'sexual ambiguity, their wordless understanding, their elective childlessness – these are not things you find often in American television' (Cooke, 2015: 8) so that its narrative presentation is especially delightful. It is there in the measured way Claire navigates around the Capital, in her statuesque poses, in her curt dialogue. It is there in the symmetry of the camera's achingly slow movements, so that we feel as though we are in a museum watching people who act as if they are being watched, their motions unable to sustain spontaneity or countenance impulsivity. And it is there in the absence of Frank during season six, except that now, without the dynamic dialogue between Spacey and Wright, it ends up feeling like stagnation.

The reason Frank's murder of his lover (journalist Zoey Barnes in season two) was so shocking was because it happened so suddenly. Viewers are inured to Frank's capacity for

murder because he orchestrated the death of another character, Congressman Peter Russo only three Chapters prior. However, in both cases, the build-up to the murders was a slow burn that took two seasons before Frank deliberately got him drunk and left him asleep in his closed garage to suffocate on the carbon monoxide fumes from his running car. The suspense builds throughout season two as Russo slowly spins out of control, the narrative misdirecting us to expect Russo to commit suicide. Similarly, Frank gives no indication in asides that he intends to murder Zoey so we ultimately come to disregard the veracity of his direct addresses.

The contrast lies with the way Frank, in midst of a typical exchange of information, in shoves Zoey off the platform in front of an approaching train in a swift blur of motion in Chapter 13. The moment of Zoey's death is foreshadowed (upon re-watching) in a previous scene earlier in the episode, when Frank visits Freddie's BBQ Joint, his favourite restaurant which he frequents throughout the first and second seasons to enjoy the succulent ribs away from the prying eyes of the press. During the scene, Freddie's euphonic chopping unexpectedly punctuates the narrative in sharp audible cuts in action aligned with the cleaver on the chopping board, in an audiovisual synchronization of diegesis with non-diegetic sound.

This both primes and teases the viewer for a scene later in the episode when Frank returns to the restaurant. In the sequence, Freddie slams his hand on the table, startling the usually unflappable Frank, as Freddie conveys how it is best to kill a pig unsuspectingly by pretending to feed it (alluding to Frank's feeding Zoey information in the train station as per usual), so it does not realise it is about to be die and there is 'no screaming'. This coupling

of rhetorical devices and sound effects makes for a jar sequence that synchronises the temporal progression of the programme [LT92].

The general lack of motion in *House of Cards* is off-putting because the characters are meant to be off-putting with sudden bursts of action intended to break the dialogue, release tension and thrill the viewer. Moreover, the precision of the script lends a tautness to the programme that gives the stillness a dramatic effect. This detached filming is never intrusive yet still establishes the camera as omnipresent, as if the characters know they are being watched, akin to the constant scrutiny politicians contend with. In this sense, it is we the viewers who are doing the spying.

In the end, the stillness personified by Claire may be likened to a kind of waiting. For the first few seasons, she grows impatient with waiting around to assume the reins of power or, at least, fully share them. Her frustration with Frank's intransigence causes her to totter out on him at the end of season four, though she returns when he realises that they need each other to succeed in their plans and promises they will be equal partners. Yet, in the final season when Claire is a lone operator, 'five of the eight episodes over-emphasize his importance and fail to create arcs worthy of Wright's talents or Claire's individuality' (Travers, 2018: 7), so that 'waiting in the wings' feeling is never really resolved.

6.4.1 Control as Power

As its core, *House of Cards* uses the aesthetic strategies delineated in the previous sections to explore the concept of control as an expression of power. That is, the codex supplied by Fincher's conception of the storyworld and Netflix's trust in his ability to attract and hold viewers is related to his talent for systematically coordinating narrative suspense in

the film industry. It is inconceivable that a creative director would be able to persuade a production company to invest \$100 million without a pilot had they not his track record of commercial success. Although Fincher's director film credits have recouped investor capital with gross box-office receipts exceeding \$2.1 billion (IMBD, 2021), his success is embedded within his reputation as a 'control freak, a director obsessed with attaining perfection no matter how many takes it needs or whose feelings he hurts' (Ducker, 2020: 1). His interventions and meticulousness are legendary, especially with the lighting and camera. His early adoption of digital camera technology (Stoilov, 2014) militated against sluggish industry conventions so that he pushed both himself and his production team into uncharted terrain, positioning himself as a pioneer in the industry on par with film contemporaries such as Stephen Spielberg and James Cameron. Such a demanding presence, while aiming for beauty and perfection, borders on the authoritarian if on-set reports are to be believed (Weiner, 2020) yet without the convivial spirit of camaraderie comradery^[LT93] on television productions like *Scandal*.

Nevertheless, the codex supplied by Fincher for *House of Cards* exemplifies his commitment to absolute control of its composition, and its subsequent acceptance, even after he ceases principal direction. Film productions aside, having the power to dictate every aspect of one's imaginative vision in television projects without interference has, until relatively recently, been beyond the power of black *and* female creatives who must negotiate their way into the heavily guarded 'old boys club' of media financing. While successful showrunners like Shonda Rhimes, Michaela Cole, Regina King and Lena Waithe attest to the fact that diverse perspectives can create engrossing and entertaining stories that reject the predominance of white-centred narratives, access to funding and creative freedom; the

greenlighting of such projects remains extremely rare. It is therefore fitting that Fincher chose to attach himself to a project whose central theme is how power relations at the highest levels of US political representation operate as a blind trust more concerned with the maintenance of an asymmetrical status quo than the equitable distribution of resources and opportunity, statistical numeracy over humanitarianism and the appearance of order over the experience of nature.

The resulting lighting, colour, and sound regime in *House of Cards* is designed to make viewers feel uneasy. The lead characters (indeed most of the characters) are driven by their perceived lack of power or, alternatively, their deep-seated need for a sense of control drives both their motivations and the narrative. When Claire and Frank, in their marriage ignore their own desire for control or feel like they are being side-lined, it leads to a power struggle for control of their private discourse and the direction of their agenda. Viewers themselves experience a powerful and uncomfortable tension between this desire for control and their very inadequacy of having such agency in their own lives. *House of Cards* exploits this lack by depicting a political system where power brokers operate in the shadows, dictating the course of the country, with little regard to how it affects the typical American system so far removed from the seat of power in Washington D.C.

It would be a mistake to conflate the need for power with the sense of control because the need around how we feel about control is much deeper and has a wider scope than just seeking power and the control it brings. As an example, as the cruel and spiteful matriarch of her family, Claire's wealthy mother's battle with terminal cancer provides one of the most disturbing supporting characters. Her feeling of powerlessness transforms her from callous

person into a bed-ridden and feeble shadow of woman once it becomes clear that neither she nor anyone else can prevent the painful death that awaits her.

Claire and Frank, however, recognise that increasing their political power increases their chances of survival and depends on their absolute control of their environment, their intimate knowledge of each other allowing them to act as independent entities working towards the same goal. They use the instillation of fear in the general populace and their staff by creating uncertainty in their position, knowing the Underwoods could terminate their employment at will. Such fear makes for malleable underlings who are willing to engage in a variety of illicit or illegal activities to prove their value, blind to fact that the Underwoods are merely using them as expendable tools.

The Underwoods relish in the creating a sense of control, evidenced in the rituals they engage in and the anxiety they feel when an unexpected variable enters the political equation. From Claire's solo daily runs around the Capital to their ritual of smoking unobserved under cover of darkness at night where they reflect on the events of the day, they reassure themselves and communicate to viewers that their plans are proceeding as intended and provides a discursive framework of the locus of control they wish to possess^[LT94]. Unfortunately, since, as humans, they are unable to control everything in their environment. When other characters whose agency is independent of their largess or threats (e.g., the Russian President or journalist Tom Hammersmidt), they become even more determined and cruel to restore their fragile balance of power.

Their marriage is microcosm of this delicate balance and is one of the main sources of pleasure in *House of Cards*. Claire leaves Frank on two occasions because she feels that the union is serving only Frank's ambitions. This asymmetrical reciprocity and the narrative

struggle which ensues is re-enacted in the administration with their exchange of favours and promises given with no intention of honouring them. Such power brokering produces an image, not of a loveless marriage, but a mutually beneficial agreement. It is in fact, their contrasting natures facilitate their efficacy, producing in viewers an attraction to their dramatic negotiations with each other because they allow viewers to see them in a different light. This dynamic was critical to the suspense in the programme because we were uncertain whether their private ambitions would destroy the duality that had taken them so far.

Indeed, *House of Cards* uses their characterisation to dramatise how politicians attempt to control the political news media narrative^[LT95] by manipulating facts or manufacturing crises. Sadly, the foresight *House of Cards* demonstrates is a perverse evocation of Trump's media onslaught of disinformation. *House of Cards* suggests the idea that truth is irrelevant and only narrative matters. Aligned with the narrative implications of its perspective on the US political system, the shadows in *House of Cards* allude to the opacity of political process and inability of the average person to affect change given their lack knowledge about the arcane procedural rules. The voluminous documents in indecipherable legalese and a convoluted hierarchal bureaucracy that shuffles responsibility, makes proving culpability in protracted court proceedings available only wealthy individuals who can afford the astronomical retainer fees of constitutional lawyers^[LT96]. While *House of Cards* crafts a dark and corrupt vision of American politics that is beautifully rendered, it should not be misinterpreted as aspirational. The central characters are amoral and make all the wrong choices. Though quality television has the power to tap into the zeitgeist, as an art form, such programmes have no obligation to truthfully represent the world, as some cultural critics might argue. Instead, *House of Cards* melodramatises the mundane US political machinery

with its protracted duration and cold characterisations, controlling how the viewers feel by slowing down the perception of time and movement.

Conclusion^[LT97]

The collaborative labour required to create such a powerfully political thriller is sadly undermined by the shifts in narrative progression created by Frank's absence in season six. While Netflix took a principled ethical stand in completely evacuating Spacey's presence from the final season (neither his image nor his voice is used, despite what must have been plenty of unused footage), the narrative itself is haunted by constant references to his misdeeds and legacy as it would have been 'disingenuous to erase him' (Miller, 2018), according to Pugliese. The (re)writing of the last season feels disjointed and jumpy, with the overriding questions of whether Frank *and/or* Claire would manage to outmanoeuvre all their oppositions and/or each other, would prove themselves unstoppable and would sit atop the pillars of power being hastily recast as 'what happened to Frank?' The dynamism of the power couple was a key component of the uncertainty embedded in the programme; prior to Spacey's departure, it remained unclear which character was bluffing and which character held the trump cards.

Of course, we may never know exactly how the series was originally intended to end. However, after Willimon stepped down at the end of season four to work on an original play (Goldberg, 2016), Melissa James Gibson, one of the showrunners for the last two seasons, stated that they had always planned on a 'battle for the narrative' (Miller, 2018) between Frank and Claire. It was just their good fortune that season five ended with Claire addressing

the camera saying, 'My turn', to signify her being newly installed as the President marks the narrative point at which she would wrest control of the narrative away from Frank.

Pugliese adds that 'no matter what happened, no matter what the circumstances, we knew we had that' (Miller, 2018). Yet, instead of an epic matrimonial showdown framed by 'a female president confronting misogyny head-on and enduring hit after hit from the patriarchy' (Fernandez, 2018), the writers were forced to craft a conclusion that saved production jobs instead of being a fitting resolution which satisfied fans and did justice to the original narrative trajectory. Though they had written nine of the thirteen episodes (with outlines for eleven), we are left with a truncated season of eight episodes, written in less than two months (Fernandez, 2018). The resulting shortened season feels rushed rather than plotted and the denouement feels contrived rather than cathartic.

In deciding to kill Frank off but leaving the revelation of his murderer and the circumstances surrounding his death until the finale, the writers created an artificial suspense more akin to traditional linear television. Moreover, its shots are shorter, a change from the formerly smooth transitions as it constantly shifts between serious drama and soap opera. Chaney too observes that in its final season, *House of Cards* is 'less designed to make clear narrative sense and more focused on commenting on the traps that get set for women who pursue higher office' (2018).

The relevance of social commentary aside, such speculation fails to account for the closing scene. Claire is never one to be sloppy or lash out impulsively so it seems uncharacteristic that she, as a pregnant president, would stab Frank's former Chief of Staff Doug Stamper with a dagger-shaped letter opener, strangle him and then let him bleed out on the carpeted presidential seal. While it could be argued that strangulation is merely

Claire's *modus operandi* under duress, these events only occurred in private chambers (their bedroom and a hotel room), not in the Oval Office. How she would explain to the Secret Service just outside the room why there is a bloody corpse atop the presidential seal is unclear. It is better to consider these as an homage to Fincher's terminal ambiguity, by portraying Claire as an unreliable, having been a murderous character all along does achieve a sense of surprise in the finale and complements the series' restricted narration strategy. The tension is left unwound; the emptiness and hollowness alluded to all along becomes the programme's ending and its final sensation – confused.

As a political thriller, *House of Cards* certainly keeps politics at the centre of its narrative. Its use of hyperseriality does succeed in keeping viewers interest sustained, especially during the first several seasons. Owing to Fincher's template, the compositions are beautifully arranged and the darkness and shadows coupled with the dynamic dialogue between characters created an eerie tension that was engrossing. However, in the final season its pacing is so slow that it is almost narcoleptic. Where it does succeed is in the performance of Wright, the introduction of new characters dilutes what could have been an elegant character study of her iciness. During earlier seasons, her steely antiheroism was so chilling to watch as she became more controlled and quietly manipulative, yet by the series finale, the programme feels stagnant and even monotonous.

Without Frank as a foil, the excess feels hollowed out, the melodrama subdued to a weak story with new supporting characters that do not excite as their dynamic conflict is substituted for limp exchanges with Doug. While it was rousing to see the female characters tackle the patriarchy in the corridors of power, the stakes simply were not high enough. The large jumps in continuity were jarring, but not pleasurable. I found myself caring less and

less about how the plot points would be resolved because the programme had been drained of its momentum and palpable chemistry created by the affective contrast between Claire and Frank.

Sadly, Claire's astringent emotionlessness pitted against Frank's florid expressivity was the driving force of *House of Cards* with the spartan mise en scène giving them the ample space to allow their contrasting energies to fill the frame. The vacuum left behind by his absence sucks the life of the programme as it limps along with characters possessing no comparable gravitas. The convoluted and muddled dialogue is distracting and superfluous rather than crisp and pointedly uncomfortable and made it feel like the writers hastily reshuffled the deck of cards to give viewers some sense of closure, but it collapses under its own inability to focus on Claire. In the end, we spend more time trying to determine who killed Frank than being impressed by Claire's machinations. For a character who is never seen, somehow Frank ends up filling every scene.

CHAPTER 7 – THESE THRILLING TALES: EVALUATING TELEVISION

Introduction

Looking at *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* together, we can see there are several similarities that link them together, though they are, of course, differently inflected. While the programmes have their own internal logics and sensorial fields in relation to the expectations and conventions of the political thriller genre, it is also important, in concluding this thesis, to reflect upon how the programmes converge and diverge in their stylistic intents as quality US political thrillers. I shall follow this with a reflection on the limitations of my stylistic analysis. I will conclude by considering the contribution of my work to the field of television aesthetics, and its wider significance beyond. Finally, I suggest potential directions and areas for future research.

As generic thrillers, the programmes' 'classic suspense schema' (Gerrig, 2013: 98) of darkness, suspense and danger within this genre are, firstly, meant to excite viewers. Yet they do not fall into the trap of stimulating such responses only to restore the status quo with tidy resolutions and happy endings. With their antiheroine leads, the programmes act as a 'rigorous political and epistemological training, a way to focus energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency' (Levine, 2003: 2), prompting an aesthetic reconsideration of how the genre often demands knowing exactly what happens to the protagonist by the conclusion of the programme.

7.1 Light and Colour

The foremost quality which makes these programmes so beautiful is their use of light and, relatedly, colour. The programmes are aided by technical choices carefully chosen to support their artistic goals and creative vision. As noted earlier, in *Homeland* and *Scandal*, the duskiness that permeates the screen is attributable to the ARRI ALEXA and post-production colour grading.

Because ARRI's proprietary colour science specifically deals with saturation (in relation to luminance) and colour separation (otherwise known as hue convergence), foliage and flowers (yellows and green) are often quite jarring due to the difficulty in managing green as it overlaps with red and blue. The vividness of these objects can feel out of place, but skin tones are where ARRI have always excelled compared to their competitors. Flesh tones do not jump off the screen and different ones are weighed equally so no one hue dominates. This is extremely good for programmes that have a diverse cast (as *Homeland* and *Scandal* do). They blend softly and are pleasing to the eye. The ARRI ALEXA produces skin tones that are both saturated but bright at the same time, while not being brightly saturated. Though these are seemingly 'dry' technical choices, the actual result is both aesthetically and politically significant, going beyond 'respecting' the diversity of the casts, to appreciating and finding the beauty in that diversity. What appears as a merely technical choice of camera, therefore, has not only creative but also political and aesthetic implications. Therefore, it is important to respect that they are intertwined and not to neglect the technical, the aesthetic, the creative, the political or the contextual ramifications of such decisions.

Interestingly, although *House of Cards* uses RED Epic and Epic Dragon camera systems for the duration of the series, the image capture was obtained using ARRI and Zeiss Master Prime series lenses, the same used in *Homeland* and *Scandal*. That Fincher chose to use these lenses rather than native RED lenses is a testament to their importance in the production of a large image composition with the freedom to precisely render the colours in different skin tones and to express the metaphorical uses devised by the creative team. It also helps to explain why the yellow/blue grounding found in *House of Cards* is so prominent as it would have been significantly downgraded in the ALEXA while still able to execute the extremely shallow depth of field that Fincher is so fond of using.

The minimal use of high-energy colours such as reds and greens in *Homeland*, *House of Cards* and *Scandal* is dependent on the chromaticity diagram to gauge colour, tone and hue. To create the mood of these programmes, the creative team considers and correlates colour associations to selectively emphasise what they want viewers to focus on and correspondingly feel. Our eyes see a lot of hues between red and green, and the chromaticity diagram shows us why: the red and green cones in our retinas overlap considerably. Green contributes approximately 70% to our sense of brightness, and red contributes another 20% or so (Choudry, 2014). Those two ranges combined constitute 90% of our sense of how light or dark things are. When these are reduced, we perceive the composition to be much darker than it is, while bluer hues make the interiors appear cold, the stimulation effected by yellows allows us to perceptually move through the composition. This goes some way to seeing how Fincher was able to create the kind of structural kineticism in *House of Cards*. Moreover, as a matter of curiosity, the cooler gradations of colour and greyscale addresses the **sensibilities**

[LT98]of the premium viewers (i.e., Netflix and Showtime) as opposed to the warmer colours apparently enjoyed by broadcast viewers of *Scandal*.

Because of the additive system used in digital cameras, colour grading is objectively based on mathematically manipulating light even though the ‘corrections’ made are subjectively based on the taste of the colourist, albeit with guidance from the director, cinematographer and set designer. While this entails a wide range of processes – from gamma lift and gain to colour filtering – given the scope of this thesis and the purpose of political thrillers, I have limited much of the discussion to the consideration of exposure and contrast with minor deviations to saturation and tone. I have also suggested how adjusting these factors can profoundly alter a programme’s look and feel.

Dramatic light heightens the contrast we experience, increases our perception of danger and shows just how the expressive power of light in political thrillers can be propelled to a higher level of sophistication. Most impressive in this regard is *Scandal*. *Scandal* composes scenes with highlights within clusters of warmer tones [LT99]and accentuating the light with bevellation, refractive doubles and reflections during narratively pivotal moments. Particularly when Olivia and her gladiators are being motivated to act for a good cause, the concentration of light is articulated in the space surrounding her – in a very real sense, lighting Washington from above gives Olivia the **valorous halo** common in the visual representations of angel[LT100]s, signifying the ‘rightness’ of her actions, akin to her ‘White Hat of justice’.

Scandal uses light to control exposure by using Olivia as a screen upon which to project ideas about the fraught cultural and political milieu in America, upon which the programme depends to coordinate its plotlines. It shows how she ‘handles’ the present crisis

by greying the facts - manipulating public discourse and details in the face of being threatened with multiple exposure attempts. *Homeland* uses light to increase luminosity, conveying the object of spying as a national threat in the hope of overcoming it and restoring the balance of power. Yet this threat is unseen, invisible or simply unknown, so spying FUIs must somehow appropriate this somatic tension into their technical materiality while narratively justifying its use^[LT101].

Like much in *House of Cards*, the programme's use of light is more dramatic than in either *Homeland* or *Scandal*. Owing to Fincher's aesthetic template, stark lighting is used pseudo-naturalistically. Despite its wide and symmetrical compositions, *House of Cards* does not feel as overly stylised as *Scandal* or as granular as *Homeland* as light serves a naturalistic function with the key lighting provided by large tungsten lamps (lighting sets from 'outside') and neutral colour palette (with added lens diffusion) being highly desaturated in post-production. Moreover, filming with a RED Epic Dragon camera in 6K permits the increased resolution to give darkness and shadow prominence, with the epic battle between lighting and darkness being played out in in the dramatic interaction between the two.

7.1.1 Darkness and Shadow

Darkness is another key feature linking our programmes. The darkness which pervades the programmes – thematically, visually, metaphorically and even narratively – can be seen as suffusing these thrillers with a moody atmosphere of uncertainty. It creates a mood of menace which corresponds not only with the viewer's real feelings of anxiety about the lack of knowledge such darkness aesthetically represents but also with the pressing danger facing the protagonist.

I have shown that exposure is the simplest concept to grasp intuitively (and indeed it is the simplest curve to calculate) as it only affects the overall brightness of a scene. As elaborated in chapter 3, the most common way to represent exposure is with F stops, where each stop represents a power of 2. By adjusting for F stops, scenes can become suffused with darkness, visually taking the shape of shadows. Fincher is a master at using these hidden spaces and his technique works well with Wright's alabaster visage against shaded backgrounds. These differ sharply with the intensely emotional expressions of Danes and Washington so we may conclude that in the latter two programmes, the framing effects of darkness are meant to emphasise and accentuate the observation of (apparently) spontaneous and explosive 'bright' emotion.

Rather than using shadow as a mere counterpoint, afterthought or an undesirable effect to be compensated for, these programmes make darkness central to their composition. In *Homeland*, the granular monochromatism, the strained expressions on Carrie's face (most distinct when Carrie is in one of her manic states), her tense erratic postures and the intermittent action give the programme a dynamism of internal conflict.⁹² These scenes demonstrate, beyond the spatial properties of geometry, the strategic placement of darkness and light, creating an image of isolation and vulnerability by rendering her clearly lit while enclosed by the darkness of the room.

⁹² The shadows in later seasons are not as dark as they are in earlier ones. However, the subtler tonal scale towards the end may be the result of increased computer power of digital cameras to calculate the variations of shadows and their effects as much as the influence of other political thrillers' techniques.

7.1.2 Contrast

Homeland emphasises contrast by playing with the concept of duality which it manifests throughout (e.g., Carrie's conflicted sense of American identification of self and nation). Its use of monochromatic black and white framing (in the title sequence), naturalistic lighting and chiaroscuro compositions establishes a very realistic look that balances the feeling of a thriller with a believable impression of moving through the world, palpably contrasting the real and the fictive. Again, it is yet to be fully determined whether *Homeland* will shift in tone, focus or subject in its final season, but we can assume that it will continue to deal with the crises of fragmentation in middle-class identity and the political landscape. Especially considering the ultimately uneventful but partisan US Senate impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump and the backdrop of the forthcoming presidential elections setting the stage to deeply polarise subsections of the American population against one another, we can reasonably expect stronger 'themes of "disappointment and disillusionment" that depend on the "adventures of shadowy characters" and their stratagems of detection, conspiracy, and surveillance' (Shapiro, 2015: 153).

In comparison, *Scandal* emphasises contrast through its thematic deployment of exposure. It embeds the (thriller) generic expectation of anticipation into its structure, setting up the audience to wait and see, and transforming it into excitement and agitation. The greyness that characterises exposure is the absolute transition between white and black and the very definition of contrast, that transforms viewer's perception of the work. Moreover, its casting choice of a black lead sharply contrasts with the conventional white representation in American television dramas. This precise control of colour creates a paradoxical visual vertigo (with flashing lights, bevellation and wipes) that is strangely pleasurable.

Contrast in *House of Cards* is most conspicuous in its characterisations. We see this first in the chasm between Claire and Frank. The tension between good and evil is personified in Claire and exemplified in her battle with Hammerschmidt as she tries to suppress his story exposing Frank's deeds going public and ruining their legacy. Visually, contrast is also executed in the blue accent of the foreground with yellow in the background. This overarching contrast is so markedly different from both *Homeland* and *Scandal* where there is at least the pretence that Carrie and Olivia are fighting for the greater good. On *House of Cards*,

there's no such thing as good, only corrupt and less so, with the former invariably preying upon the latter. No one's fighting to do the right thing...As Goethe wrote, "Yellow is a light which has been dampened by darkness; blue is a darkness weakened by light" (Adams, 2015: 3).

Nevertheless, the three political thrillers are beautiful because they successfully activate a curiosity about their own composition while still retaining the mysteriousness of the genre. They succeed (in different ways) by casting light as a tangible and integral part of the narrative with their use of darkness and lighting which combine in a contrasting kind of unity that is quite beautiful. Of course, the duality of light and darkness (again, narratively cast as the withholding of knowledge) are not the only aesthetic attributes that the programmes contain but they are the major ones.

7.2 The Form of Political Thrillers

As *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* are all political thrillers, we should expect them to be generically comparable. And indeed, they bear many resemblances to and connections with each other in this respect. These programmes represent a genre that strives

to remove viewers from their quotidian experiences and allows them to inhabit, if only for a few moments, what it is like to unravel an international murder conspiracy or be placed in mortal danger (Schubart and Gjelsvik, 2004). As American political thrillers, they use the US government and its various organs as their narrative backdrop to organise plot points and make distinctive cultural references. Using familiar institutional settings, geographic locales and especially the notion of the political establishment as the centre of corruption wielding its dastardly influence in unseen ways over the populace (Maortua and Echart, 2015), *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* portray our antiheroines as part of a select few who must find a way of navigating the terrible secrets that lie at the heart of darkness. Again here, *Homeland* and *Scandal* are more aligned than *House of Cards*; in the former two, our protagonists attempt to expose the malignancy eroding society, while Claire is content to entrench it so long as she remains in power.

In casting politics as dangerous, these political thrillers are doing several things. Though we are, strictly speaking, concerned with fiction, these programmes still instil a sense of fear in the viewer. This fear is sympathetically affixed onto the protagonist and their place in their narrative. By keeping both she (and us by proxy) in the dark, we actively try to assuage that fear by exposing whatever it is we do not know. This ignorance, protracted by suspense, makes us feel vulnerable because it alludes to the military industrial complex that exists in ‘real world’ politics and yet we know hardly anything about it.

This has always been one of the most enduring aspects of thrillers in general. In tying together all the narrative threads in the final denouement, they reduce its uncertainty and eliminate suspense. That is, the experience of narrative suspense is minimal (as distinct from instinctive ‘trigger responses’ that startle viewers), if felt at all, when the programme is

rewatched. We do not rewatch a thriller with the same heightened feeling of uncertainty which drives the narrative as we do during an initial viewing. It could be argued that programmes which achieve the merit of quality can sustain multiple viewings, but rather than being thrilled anew, if we return to them, we (cognitively) turn our attention to the excesses that we missed, the linkages we failed to make, the lingering questions we might have, the moments lost because we were distracted, to reconsider on a more learned level what we now know we like. And this leads us to a counterintuitive observation, that ‘the excitement...is just what *must* disappear... [And] not until the curiosity, the sheer narrative lust, has been given its sop and laid asleep, are we at leisure to savour the real beauties’ (C S Lewis, 2002: 102-103, emphasis my own).

7.2.1 Antiheroism

Homeland, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* all contain female protagonists who are complex, contradictory, exhibit strength, are professionally competent, ambitious, self-sufficient. They are authoritative leaders who can maintain control of their [LT102]emotions, which has been conventionally coded as masculine (Heilman, 2012), when they need to. Indeed, since Carrie, Olivia and Claire are morally ambivalent, in this sense, they are less ‘heroines’ than ‘antiheroines’. Fictional antiheroines are not especially new; Hester Prynne, the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850), Emma Bovary from *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert, 1856), Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (c. 1806) and Sula Peace from *Sula* (Morrison, 1983) are three literary antecedents. Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher, 2011), and Shosanna Dreyfus (Melanie Laurent) from *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009) are two noteworthy filmic characters while television

antiheroines like Nancy Botwin (Mary Louise Parker) in *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012) and Analise Keating (Viola Davis) in *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-2016) embody this fictional type of character. These transgressive characters are not simply one-dimensional ‘strong female leads,’ as might be suggested by the Netflix category were the streaming service in existence in antiquity. Rather, they are more exciting and complex characters who reject the notion of feminine virtue by blurring the line between good and evil (Giomi, 2017).

Mittell observes that the ‘distinctive lack of female characters [...] who approach the antiheroic status’ (2015: 143) in the 21st century, in comparison to the antiheroes which have dominated the discourse on quality television (e.g., *Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire* and *Mad Men*), has led to an increasing demand for and a welcome proliferation of female protagonists who disrupt traditional constructions of femininity. According to recent literature emerging from the likes of Milly Buonanno’s edited volume *Television Antiheroines* (2017) and Margaret Tally’s *The Rise of the Antiheroine in TV’s Third Golden Age* (2016), antiheroine portrayals of challenging, multifaceted and powerful women have emerged, ‘coinciding with the end of a number of series centred on male anti-heroes’ (Tally, 2016: 5). The growth of the antiheroine as a character who ‘provokes ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance’ (Mittell, 2015: 143) suggests their primary traits – troublesome, unlikability, mental acuity, moral compromise and lack of conventional mothering instincts – are ‘characterized by the distinctive quality of liminality’ (Buonanno, 2016: 11) consisting of justifiable criminality and personal agency (Lotz, 2017).

Of course, it is important that we not blur the distinctions between complex female protagonists and antiheroines. We need to sustain a distinction between the two, for accuracy

and for the sake of treating female characters just as we do male ones. In this sense, the traits Mittell identifies are themselves gendered and sexist and are mostly the result of conservative views and stereotypes.

The evolution of this subversive characterisation is differently embodied in the characters of Carrie Mathison, Olivia Pope and Claire Underwood, respectively. Carrie is bipolar, arrogant, unethical and fantasises about drowning her daughter in the bathtub. Olivia is argumentative, power-hungry, tactically shrewd and aborts her pregnancy because having it would be a huge inconvenience in her life (simply put, she just did not want it). Claire is unempathetic, ruthless, narcissistic and willing to let her employee's unborn child 'wither and die inside [her], if that's what is required' (Chapter 13). If we accept that these characterisations appear against the backdrop of 'the male barycentre in [prime-time dramatic] television storytelling' (Buonanno, 2017: 7) where 'female-centred shows fail to feature the narrative and character depth of the male-centred serials' (Lotz, 2014: 192), then we cannot and, more importantly, should not perceive them as bad or even negative. Instead, they are representative of the storyteller's (i.e., showrunner, writer, director, etc.) rejection of restrictive gender norms that challenge the way such women have been traditionally characterised and understood.

Taken together, these female protagonists have helped to raise the bar of representable femininity by rejecting the gender binarism rife in television and society at large. This new politics of gender representation (Gray and Lotz, 2019) is articulated through the lens of ambition and professionalism rather than being entirely limited to motherhood and female deference towards men (D'Acci, 2004). It emphasises their entrepreneurship, personal responsibility for their successes and failures, the freedom to pursue power and their

unapologetic sexual agency as a replacement of females' former status in male-centric thriller narratives where women were ancillary to plot progression except as love-interests or minor conflicts to overcome (Warner, 2015). This recalibration provides us the opportunity to watch (and enjoy) different permutations of female characterisations that we simply are not used to seeing.

On the themes of love and desire, neither Claire nor Carrie end up in a happy-ever-after romantic resolution. Claire pushes away or kills every man who comes remotely close to piercing her chilly armour. Carrie is incapable of sustaining a relationship without her paramour ending up dead (excluding her Berlin boyfriend Jonas, who abandons her out of self-preservation since he cannot live with the constant mortal threat to him and his son) due to the potential danger her job poses on her loved ones (i.e., her sister and daughter). In the case of Olivia, like much in *Scandal*, her character trajectory ends ambiguously. Though we are presented with a final scene in which Olivia's portrait is hanging in the White House, it remains unclear whether it is meant to convey that she finally got herself elected President or whether she was merely First Lady^[LT103]. This 'grey,' or ambiguous, ending is the most disruptive (and troubling) aspect of antiheroism insofar as it transforms our expectations of female subjects but keeps the possibility of a realignment with culturally coded gender norms very much alive (Bombert, 1999).

7.2.2 Comparing Characterisations

Despite their troublesome ways, our antiheroines offer television performances intended to be savoured. Turning first to Carrie, we may say she is highly motivated professionally and pathologically willing to sacrifice her sanity, her family and her

relationships to prove she is right and avert what she believes to be the biggest threat to US interests. Her intensity makes many of her colleagues and associates wary of working with her. Though Carrie is consistently unable to keep either her professional or personal life from unravelling, she has successfully thwarted domestic plots and international attacks while (barely) managing to keep her daughter alive.

Olivia is unbothered by the legal ramifications of her activities so long as neither she, her accomplices or clients are held culpable. This moral grey area blurs the distinction between what she considers right and wrong. Such behaviours and justifications become increasingly problematic to the point where she has swapped her 'White Hat' for a pair of blood-stained stilettos by the time the series ends. Paradoxically, aside from her gut, Olivia values honesty and fidelity, a curiosity considering she has made a successful business out of lying and manoeuvring her position to achieve her goals.

Claire, on the other hand is quite understated in her mannerisms and can even come off as unassuming. Underestimating her apparent image of elegant quietude is an error in judgment most, if not all, soon regret, as Claire is as power-hungry as she is deceitful. Her greatest asset is her patience: she can calculate what she wants and manipulate the people around her for years, if necessary. As an ostensible foil for Frank's charming and gregarious public persona, Claire is just as cunning in private. Like Carrie, she does not hesitate to sacrifice whoever and whatever gets in her way, if it gets her what she wants.

What is so beautiful about these television antiheroines is that they are characters who are nuanced and contradictory. Carrie and Olivia are selfish but willing to help others, while Claire is more inclined to only being seen as helpful. They are all vulnerable, even though such expressions rarely occur in the presence of another character, but with incredible

stores of strength in Carrie's pursuit of national security and Olivia's fight for the greater good of 'The Republic'. Claire, on the other hand, is only interested in her own ambition and power for the control it exerts. Carrie and Olivia are empathetic when they have a genuine attachment to a person or cause but aloof when they do not care about someone. Claire does not really care about anyone, in the end, not even Frank. All these women are intelligent without question, but Carrie and Olivia often defer to their gut feelings or intuition (leading to the lip quivering dissonance between the smart thing to do and the right thing to do) whereas the viewer is perpetually left wondering why Claire makes the decisions she does. This changing representation of women is more than conventional ideological fantasies being altered for niche viewership (Kaplan, 2000) or to display how such women pay for the crime of divergence (Heidensohn, 1996). The desire for such characters, with their mix of violence and vulnerability, can be seen in their recent proliferation on television programmes such as *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-present), *Watchmen* (HBO, 2020) and *The Queen's Gambit* (Netflix, 2020) and *Batwoman* (CW, 2019-present).

This suggests a popular craving for the type of televisual experience that challenges gender stereotypes and representations that transgress the regimes of control in the real world. We as viewers are invited to experience a perspective, temporarily unburdened by the objectionable, tragic events and inequitable issues that women must grapple with in the real world (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Watching such antiheroines, as vehicles of conflict, navigate the 'liminality, that is, being in between good and evil' (Giomi, 2017: 109) that viewers also must negotiate, though not always with such high stakes, is as cathartic as it is escapist and potentially empowering (Warner, 2019).

It is supremely satisfying watching women get away with questionable behaviour without necessarily having to assess the impact these programmes have on the strictures and conflicts in our own lives with which we must all variously contend (Lotz, 2006). Moreover, these characters work because they embody Raquel Gates' activation of negative representation as 'the repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media' (2015: 622). In lacking conventional representations while still obliquely revealing 'the very power structures that continue to condition and circumscribe women's lives in the contemporary era' (Akass and McCabe, 2018: 76) via contrast with these conditions, *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* show us the possibility of another, if strangely thrilling, way.

7.2.3 Who Knew Jazz Could Be So Thrilling?

The use of jazz music in these programmes is a surprising commonality because the musical genre is not commonly associated with political thrillers. In *Homeland*, we saw how the jazz music in the main title sequence is used to create the tone of programme with an undulating erraticism that emulates the fractured interiority and unconventional methodology of Carrie. Its progression functions like her bipolar stream of consciousness and as a proxy for the periodisation in American society, showing how she thinks through 'simultaneous registers of history and to situate events as variations on a structuring theme' (Shapiro, 2015: 155). It is also successfully composed to break up the narrative tension. Its usage was an obvious device in the first seasons but increasingly tapered out from season five. This was deliberate with the jazz coming squalling back like a bold bleating trumpet in the final episode. Having moved to Moscow and acting as a double agent, Carrie goes to a live concert

of jazz star Kamasi Washington, composer of the avant-garde jazz score that opens every episode and represents ‘the very essence of Carrie’s Dionysian energy – chaotic, intuitive, transgressive’ (Donaghy, 2020: 5).

In *Scandal*, the jazz music moves from the pilot episode right through to the closing credits. Its jazz profile is melodiously more up-tempo and soulful punctuated with elements of funk, as it must work hard to keep up with the numerous twists and turns of ‘*Scandal* pace.’ Jazz in *Scandal* has always served to highlight these black musicians and provide them fair finance and the exposure that they were denied through theft, segregation and mismanagement when many of these songs were initially released in the 1960s and 1970s (reference). Quite unexpectedly, in Rhimes’ celebration and (musical supervisor) Patsava’s organisation, they did something beautiful in season four: they broke the fourth wall with music when they used Michael Jackson’s song *Ben* (quite literally about a rat) to introduce Olivia’s mother. While this duo capitalised on the successful reception of this technique by knowledgeable fans by interweaving later tributes to real artists into its narrative, as Smith praises,

centring the world of *Scandal* on a Black woman was historic, something that hadn’t been done in 40 years. Centring the soundtrack on Black artists, highlighting Black excellence, achieves another important feat: it gives us another avenue to relate to and support the songs, both hits and deep cuts, of some of the most impressive artists in music’s history (2018: 14)

The jazz music in *House of Cards* is also remarkable, though historically less impressive. Its operatic sombreness and the slow drawn out original musical compositions from Jeff Beal are a departure from the rapid scattering of the other programmes. He scored the music to be not just thematically about the sheer force of power in music itself, but also symbolised the symphonic movements [LT105] to align with the intrigue of politics and the characters

on the show. His training as a jazz trumpeter and recording artist infuses *House of Cards* with a deep, almost plaintive rhythm that echoes across the seasons. The thick tension that we experience when we listen is almost antithetical to the improvisation and spontaneity that normally characterises jazz. It fuses a dissonance of tone and theme of discontent into the feeling of something being ‘not quite right’ that underscores the programme and leaves us with a palpable uneasiness. This mood never really dissipates and haunts the programme with a weird melancholia, that, while capturing the essence of suspense, ultimately fails to [unwind](#)^[LT106].

Sound is critically important in both the creative process and the finished television works. I have shown how music and other *objets sonores* are part of what makes the television works stand out from, and link with, other television programmes. This endeavour was aimed at illustrating how important sound and music have been to the creators of the programmes and therefore to my analyses of the works. The analysis chapters evince how unusually important the music has been for all three programmes, even early in the creative conceptualisation for each work. In paying such attention to sound and music, and in respecting their integration in the programmes, I have made clear that television aesthetics is not simply limited to visual style.

7.2.4 Changing Trajectories

Another commonality between the programmes as evinced in the analysis chapters is that they all exhibit a degree of complexity that sustains the viewer’s close attention and demands forced memory recall. This narrative mode with its ‘toleration for storytelling confusion and delayed gratification’ (Mittell, 2007: 17) is dependent on the revelation of narrative details that are unexpected but which ‘make sense’ in the story arc in a kind of ‘aha’

moment. Regarding this aspect, *House of Cards* is only extremely successful due to its hyperseriality; again, this has more to do with Netflix's operational functionality and Fincher's creative freedom. With a distribution platform that natively allows for the rewinding and re-watching of scenes with intricate political jargon, interwoven character threads or simply because the onscreen composition was too dark, *House of Cards* 'discourages casual consumption'. Sadly, Spacey's departure unintentionally shifted the tone, pacing and narrative trajectory of the programme so that its conclusion feels forced and scandalously patched up.

Rhimes reported she knew how *Scandal* was going to end back in 2013 when she said 'I know what the end of *Scandal* will be, and I feel really good about that. And I can see where the end point is' (Lawler, 2013). However, she was compelled to amend this in 2017 when she remarked 'I used to know how it ended, and then Donald Trump was elected... We had a destination, and I don't know if that's our destination anymore' (Goldberg, 2017). Such revisions point to the way that political thrillers' reliance on current sociopolitical developments can change their narrative *in medias res*, and not always for the best. Although such topicality is part of the political thriller's appeal, as it saliently connects viewers fictional diversions with the real issues impacting on their governance (at least for the creatives on the show), what happens when the material showrunners, writers and producers draw from the current political scene, when life begins to imitate art?

While Steenberg and Taser assert that *Homeland* is generic in the sense that the programme 'intervenes in a representational landscape in which the moral legitimacy of (political) violence is debated with intensity and regularity' (2015: 133), its narrative complexity—arising from the depiction of Carrie's psychological complexity, how she

grapples with her mental illness, her ‘obsession with Brody but also the suggestion of an emotional and/or sexual tension between her and mentor Saul (Mandy Patinkin)—stretches the formulas it reproduces’ (134). Now concluded, *Homeland* rewarded faithful viewers’ patience with its diegetic withholding, Carrie’s hysterical emotionalism, dubious allegiances and fractured mental state being transformed into prescience and exquisite spycraft as she becomes a ‘prisoner of war’ as Saul’s new asset in Russia. Interestingly, the memory recall which was so critical to the maintenance of *Homeland*’s narrative complexity remained a plot point in the final season (Showtime, 2020), ensuring the programme continued to be structured around exposure, ‘teasing out the questionable fidelity of surveillance footage with its blind spots and lacunae’ (Steenberg and Taser, 2015:134).

7.2.5 Resonances and Political Discourse

Homeland and *Scandal* have more in common with each other than they do with *House of Cards*. All three programmes involve the machinations and political intrigues that take place within, around and because of the U.S. government. In terms of characterisation, all our protagonists try to conceal their romantic personal lives from their colleagues, and all may be considered antiheroines. However, Carrie and Olivia use their internal gut feelings (a rapid synthesis of evaluation, intellect and perspective) to direct their tactical decision making, while Claire makes more strategic calculations. Moreover, the facial expressivity and excessive outbursts of Danes and Washington’s overwrought lip quivers and demanding exhortations sharply contrast with the muted and subtle performance of Wright.

Homeland is a realistic political thriller that imaginatively represents the geopolitical consequences created by the intersection of illicit surveillance, fragile foreign political

alliances and the hierarchal government agencies that must continually re-evaluate their intelligence (even when the facts are almost unbelievable) with the intention of denoting genuine issues such as national security and counterterrorism. *Scandal* is a melodramatic political thriller that exemplifies the expression of excess in performance and the cinematographic techniques that invites viewers to ‘linger over devices longer than their structured function would seem to warrant’ (Thompson, 2004: 516) The show nevertheless advances debates about everything from the government’s use of torture to voter fraud.

House of Cards, on the other hand, is a dramatic, almost operatic political thriller that focuses just as much on the interpersonal power dynamics, tensions and frigidity between its co-leads as it does showing how the petrified power dynamics of one-upmanship cause gridlock between the competing branches of government. Indeed, while *Scandal* and *Homeland*’s extensive use of FUIs employ spying as a trope about the giving and withholding of knowledge, visually and narratively modelling a debate about the knowability of the world, this is only implied in *House of Cards*, and only rarely at that. *House of Cards* instead emphasises the behind-the-scenes power brokering in politics.

In *Scandal*, the use of spying has more of an amoral character. The characters often spy because of their own self-interests (or those of their clients). Yet, *Scandal*’s most striking representation of spying is achieved when the viewer made to feel like a person in the room who? is participating in the act, as the cinematographic excess simulates the sensation that we are peering through glass or into a mirror into another room, though this view is both blurred and refracted. In *Homeland*, spying is characterised as a moral imperative for the practice of sovereign freedom and the securitisation of American life. It is cast as a necessary evil to thwart plots that would hurt America’s interests. The spying is diegetic and involves

the installation of various cameras and equipment to be viewed and analysed from a safe and discreet distance on one or numerous screens. It also exploits the pleasure afforded by a strange computational aesthetic where we are watching someone spying suggesting that the American public's relationship to mediated formats (YouTube, television, film and social media, etc.) is stronger and more influential than its relationship to lived experience and reality.

7.3 The Limits of Aesthetic Pleasure

This thesis is a unique approach with the field of television aesthetics that demonstrates it is not necessarily a matter of whether we like or dislike a programme, it is instead a matter of contemplating a programme's formal aesthetic values according to one's criteria of selection and genre. In the range of a series' run, there may be episodes that are excellent, some that are bad and some which are just OK, but overall, we may call a show beautiful if it balances the satisfaction of our generic sensory expectations with the considered technical execution of obscure, though operant, principles and practices of television production. It shows considering how the programmes succeed in their generic ambitions and collective intents without direct claims of fact, though such positioning may be challenged because it does not ascribe to the positivist tradition in objective scientific research. Yet, the critical observations made here are supported by the technical 'quantitative' data of the camera; the material textuality of the work and my embodied subjectivity as the becoming of 'the viewing subject through psychic processes, discursive formations, and social and historical relations' (Pribram, 2013: 162).

At the core of my method and its significance was [LT107] turning my attention to the very materiality of the works and contemplating their composition. This a strange experience as I tend to want to lose myself in fictional narratives. It feels exceedingly odd to bracket myself from the position of someone experiencing pleasure and sensations, when they are my major concerns! Yet, in this aesthetic attitude, I can highlight aspects of my own preferences that I normally take for granted, hopefully entreating others to appreciate what simulates their pleasurable sensations.

To speak of sensations is to recall that this thesis was never conceived as a typical analysis of television genre or even about female representation within contemporary political thrillers, though these are important points that were discussed. My aim was to assess what about the programmes is so pleasurable and why. To say that I enjoy watching political thrillers does not really reveal much about the genre just as to say I enjoy the programmes does not have any convincingly explanatory power for someone who is deciding whether they should watch it or wants to know why I enjoy the programme.

I engaged with the specificity of the programmes to appreciate how their unique configuration of stylistic elements, revealed the manifold television aspects that I was, to my chagrin, ignorant of. Instead of drawing on rigid models of television spectatorship, cognitive theories or a monolithic spectator, the reflexive phenomenological analysis of the programmes enabled the discovery the centrality of camera selection in television industrial production that I was completely unaware (i.e., CameraImage, 2019). Once I recognised the material and connected it with the perceptual, I was then able to see the beautiful.

Instead of focusing on the affects of beauty, Plantinga's (2012) cognitive-evaluative theory of emotional engagement proposes emotions are always accompanied by beliefs in

connection with representational content. His view aligns with Murry Smith's (1999) sympathetic character engagement model of 'imagining from the inside' and Carroll's (2003) situated emotional appraisal of a character's plight. My reliance on the programmes' exemplification of political thrillers' sensory expectations serendipitously addressed 'the fundamental duality or ambivalence of the representational artwork' (Yacavone, 2015: 119) to be both a sensory object and a symbolic form. Thus, this thesis illustrates that the aesthetic expressions of political thrillers can be distinguished into i) cognitively informed feelings derived from a 'comprehensible narrative, genre expectations and a general visual and spatial-temporal realism and naturalism' (Yacavone, 2015: 165) and ii) affective responses that includes thrills, frisson, shocks and chills as fleeting physiological reactions to salient televisual moments converging in an excess of affective stylistic aspects such as melodrama, musicality and performance. Even though Carroll's emotional 'prefocusing' criteria could conceivably be applied to Bordwell's elements of style, Tan (1996) argues that emotions are better classified as 'fictional' or 'artefact'; the former resulting from narrative immersion while the latter is stimulated by the viewer's recognition of the work as a manufactured object and artwork.

The pleasures I derive from *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* do not reject the factual and industrial contexts of their production nor do they ignore their fictional narrative content, but recognise the artistic uses of the medium in an 'aesthetic attitude' to engage with the programmes as works of art. As the complexity and variability of affective experience is subjectively determined, no single theory of emotion or model of engagement can fully account for the diversity of aesthetic experiences. My analysis of the sensory-affective expressions transmitted by the dynamic spectacle of performance, colours, light, spatiality

and music, while foregrounding the affective power of the face in close-up shots and the sublimity of luminosity, also demonstrate the tendency of these feelings to be transitory in relation to the work's temporal progression. These 'local' sensory-affective expressions differ from the cognitive-diegetic expressions in terms of duration because vicariously entering the storyworld rather than merely observing it forms and functions, serves to generate narrative suspense by engaging with characters, actions, and situations and anticipating how the conflicts will be resolved.

The programmes' formal-artistic expressions become embodied when the creative artistic intentions exceed the cinematographic representation of their fictional narratives and storyworlds as purposive choices pertaining to some specific aspect of the work as a work, transforming the work into an aesthetic object. My aesthetic attitude entails experiencing the exemplification of duality such that viewers attend to the audiovisuality 'both as a representational window on its own represented subjects and story *and* as a meaning- and intention-bearing construction in simultaneous, or alternating, fashion' (Yacavone, 2015: 182). The more familiar I became with the discrete processes of editing in television post-production, the more sensitive I became to subtle affects of colour grading and tonality, refining my capacity for an aesthetic analysis that involves the represented 'what', the formal and stylistic 'how' and the artistic and intentional 'why' of the research questions laid out in chapter one.

While answering these questions successively enables a judgment of beauty about the works, I make a point of distinguishing beauty from what is agreeable and what is good. Both latter judgments entail an interest in the political thriller genre and in particular shots, scenes and sequences in the programmes as the material conditions which enable the perception of

beauty, but they are not the cause of it. It is in the reflective act of appreciating the way these conditions pleurably affect me that I am afforded the freedom to explore how the television work's artistic style and authorship contribute to the experience of beauty. I have been careful not to equivocate the aesthetic experience of beauty and the experience of the television work as an artwork because even though the origination of both stem from my subjective experience of a feeling of strangeness, the value of both is different. Though intertwined, the former involves the enrichment of my being in the world generally while the latter is determined by the work's expressive and affective dimensions. In effect, I am experiencing both beauty and the television work of art simultaneously and appreciating the value in each.

I have demonstrated that effect the temporal accumulation of situatedness, representations, denotations, associations, symbolisms, affective valences and technological developments have on programmes textural materiality. Yet synthesising the global aesthetic expression of our television artworks satisfies the difficult criteria in Kant's four moments of beauty because the concatenation of local affective expressions cannot be simply subsumed under any pre-existing concept of the genre^[LT108]. Instead, since television seriality vastly increases the number of local expressions of moments^[LT109] of saliency, distilling a television's programmes global affective profile from its temporal duration exposes time as the lowest common denominator in every film or television programme, irreducibly woven into every formal aesthetic element of style.

Rhythm then, relates objective temporal progression with narrative movement as vector changes in intensity, direction and duration that are both felt, perceived, and can even be quantified statistically. Tools like Barry Salt's 'Cinematics' organise film^[LT110] time into seconds and shots, generating the rhythmic descriptors average shot length or ASL. Though

impractical for analysing an entire television series, I used this tool in the chapter 5 to determine the precise duration and tonality of ‘the flash’ in *Scandal* as a succession of scale [frame: shot: scene: sequence: episode: season: series] through editing, itself applicable to the ‘graphic rhythms generated by light, colour shadow, and visual depth’ (Yacavone, 2015: 209), as well as to musical movements and sound effects.

Thus, the phenomenological bracketing of quality US television political thrillers’ materiality in the assertion of a global teleaesthetic expression of strange beauty connects my *Befindlichkeit* (sense of being in the world) with the television programmes’ *Weltanschauung* (concept of being in the world which reveals itself in a personality) or style. Accordingly, it is more appropriate to characterise^[LT111] the ‘representational dimension of the aesthetic object alone (as its “body”)’ (Yacavone, 2015: 214) as exemplifying their attitudes and intention^[LT112]s. In terms of attitude, the programmes suggest the hubris of American neoliberalism as a model for international cooperation and geopolitical stability because the human capacity for change requires sacrifice and the belief that power should be fastidiously attenuated by care, respectively.

This is, humbly speaking, the value that this thesis brings to the field of television aesthetics. Like the artist who improves their technique by regularly exercising the technique, in reflexively providing my account of beauty through appreciative criticism, one major consequence of my approach was the sharpening of my perceptions and analysis of television works’ formal properties and elements. Without claiming the perfection of my approach, this thesis demonstrates the diversity of perspectives, the rigour which can be applied and encourages television scholars to reflect on what gives them pleasure, that is, what they find beautiful. Though admittedly conservative in its ambition, my aim has simply been to

generate discourse and even debate on the merits of forms and formats of television programmes, and their potential to bring people closer together by illustrating an evaluative process that hinges on an appreciative vocabulary. Of course, proceeding from subjectivity means that different viewers will have different accounts of why they watch and what they enjoy most. Rather than insufficiently stating we like a television programme; we can instead comprehensively convey the beautiful moments in a programme that expresses some phenomenal connection with ourselves.

Reflecting on the elements of style has further developed my sensitivity to the televisual aesthetics that coordinate my own viewing practices and experiences. In taking these programmes as case studies because they strongly affected me, I was compelled to interrogate the different ways they made me feel. Another major aspect of my approach to television aesthetics has been to [bridge](#)^[LT113] the technical terms and processes used in the conceptualisation and production of content with an appreciation and evaluation of the work's final form, a fusion that is virtually absent in television studies.

Though it is impractical to question every element of style that captured my attention in relation to my reactive reappraisal, I have shown my search for strangeness led me find beauty. For example, it may at first seem odd to observe that narrative exposure in political thrillers is imaginatively based on the degree of darkness used in camera exposure settings of greyscale, but the search for and discovery of other such curiosities is limited only by the practical conditions of viewing television (and the values of the researcher). These conditions represent a prime caveat with this type of textual analysis. Because it relies on the extent to which what is observed is accurate, specifically with respect to light and colour, the way one watches has a direct impact on the assertions made. To be clear, the hues (or saturation or

brightness) and their affects depend on the settings of the viewing device used. For critics looking to verify points of analysis, what they see may be significantly different from what the television aesthician sees because the former is watching the programme on a 1080 laptop screen streamed from the internet while the analyst watches the same programme broadcast on a 4K screen. Indeed, the cinematographer may have shot the programme with an 8K camera which the colourist downgraded to 6K. Moreover, even watching a programme colour graded for darkness in a brightly lit room will alter the intended visual style. This is a critical point because a viewer's eyes will unconsciously adjust to ambient colours, potentially causing them to improperly interpret a work. An analogous situation applies to sound editing and the speakers used while listening to a programme.

Still another potential issue with my approach is the assumption that viewers watch television to have an aesthetic experience. This is often the product of time. I have argued that is only when one has the leisure to savour the programmes and, having the inclination to watch and re-watch after the suspense and uncertainty of the narrative have dissipated, that one can revisit the strangeness of the composition and ponder the connecting threads. However, this thesis does not suggest that viewers only watch television or should only watch television to have an aesthetic experience. There are diverse reasons why we avail ourselves of television and aesthetics is only one.

Using close stylistic analysis on a set of quality television political thrillers initially released in the United States in the second decade of the 21st century, this thesis has been concerned with exploring and reflecting on the sensate effects of their style. In contrast to the focus on ideology and representation prevalent in television studies, this study reveals how an exploration of our sensorial relationship with television reveals their transformative power

as aesthetic objects and demonstrates how one can feel through the tensions and subtleties of the programmes' materiality to get a better sense of what makes them good and to make overtures to other television scholars as to the merit of evaluative criticism. Taken together, the research contained in this thesis and the growing scholarship in television aesthetics produce a much more nuanced picture than either can produce alone.

While I have expressed my reluctance to rely on conventional television methodologies in chapter 3, the various cultural and theoretical frameworks of television studies could be strengthened by the accumulation of different perspectives across a range of scholarly works addressing aspects of television ontology. I do not, then, see this thesis as supplanting these approaches, but supplementing them, and contributing to an appreciation of the aesthetic complexities and stylistic achievements in discrete television programmes.

7.4 Closing Credits

In this thesis, I have adopted the arguments of Cardwell (2006) and, to a lesser extent, Jacobs (2001) and Zettl (2016), and taken a broad view of genre, eschewing the canonical approaches of classification in lieu of an experiential subjectivity that respects the particularity of the television programmes. The benefit of this approach is it shows how the judgment of television programmes is drawn from their specific artistic materiality. Such an account of television encourages the development of aesthetic accounts that are far more sensitive to the diverse pleasures and ideas of beauty afforded by television programmes and invites the others to see them from different perspectives.

To a significant extent, my approach was necessitated by the desire to make quality a criterion for inclusion in this study of contemporary political thrillers. That is not to say that

I do not find other programmes worthy or pleasurable or that another criterion could reasonably have been chosen. On the contrary, my decision was restricted by time, it being impractical to discuss every programme I liked. By limiting the scope as I have, and examining the grouping for similar affectivities, enabled the discovery of connections between them to be made, opened new vistas for future studies of television aesthetics and developed a more personal conception of quality.

Recalling my primary research question was ‘how might television aesthetics enable me to critically appreciate strange beauty in quality US television political thrillers?’, I have demonstrated that television aesthetics as a field of study has enabled me to interrogate political thrillers closer than one might normally expect in a treatment of genre. Giving this freedom, my aural and visual senses tapped into and fleshed out the aesthetic formations that fall outside paradigms of normative television research and reflected on the heterogeneous elements that were unexpectedly resonant. I have also shown in which ways the programmes’ goals as thrillers were successful (or not) by reference to the intents of the creative teams stating what they were trying to achieve. Moreover, I have used innovative methods to explicate their formal production and admitted our vulnerability to the affects that make sense and effects that construct meaning. By fusing reflexivity with close stylistic analysis, this thesis has elucidated on strange beauty and welcomed the ways that television works’ themes and concepts can impinge on ‘the politics that structure the personal’ (Spry, 2001: 722) in a televisual moment.

As I have suggested [LT114] throughout this thesis, television studies can benefit from scholarship which is not defined by rigid methods or procedures. It would be fruitful to apply this grounded approach to the genre classifications [LT115] in future analyses that value experience

alongside relevant technical data, stylistic analysis and interdisciplinary literature to offer a rich and deeply personal account of viewers' relationship to television. The ways in which we make sense of television, and by extension, a world of others with their own stories to tell.

An attention to style enables the most complex of literary, cultural and philosophical reflections on those past inventions and yet still highlight their present conventions, shifting through history like the Time Traveller trying to figure out the riddle of the Sphinx (Wells, 1895), all while imaging future interventions. Though many tangents and diversions were left untraced, their points of departure are there, always, to be returned to should the mood strike. In a strange sense, it is like the turning a naive eye to the television screen, (as Gunning did to early film), to those elements 'directly solicit[ing] spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle' (Gunning: 1990: 58). But not to proffer some essentialist explanation or theoretical supposition. It is, rather, to see and hear what is almost unnoticeable: the play of light reflecting off a windowpane in the foreground or the birdsong echoing in the distance as a glistening blade is slowly extracted from a blood-soaked corpse. It is to laugh so hard when a satire nails the hubris of a nation, that a little bit of pee comes out. It is to shiver at the costuming of a Ku Klux Klansman contrasting in the blackened background night setting of a period drama and know it is unreal yet feel painful all the same. It is to tear up when a melodramatic performance, at once intimate, urgent and unexpectant, recalls a forgotten moment of loss or inspires hope. It is to behold beauty.

APPENDIX 1 – REFLECTIONS ON LIGHT, COLOUR CIRCLES AND THE CHROMATICITY DIAGRAM

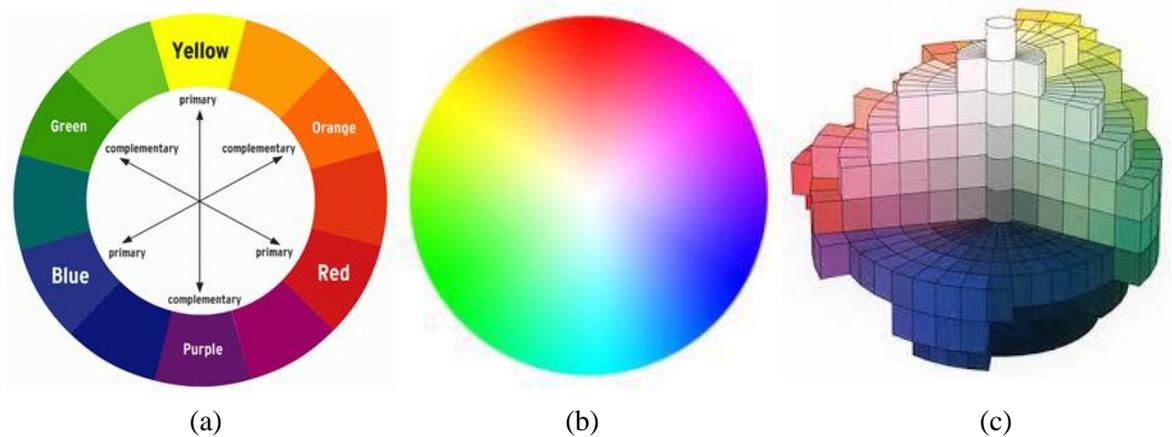


Figure 25 - colour wheel (a), colour solid (b) and cross-section of colour sphere (c)⁹³

As a function of light perception, colour is determined by three factors: hue, saturation and luminosity (Schanda, 2007). Hue is simply the name of a colour and is usually described according to its dominant wavelengths of light. The saturation of a colour is divided into two attributes – colourfulness and brightness. Thus, saturation describes the relative colourfulness in its proportion of neutral grey and determines the intensity of a colour. Chroma refers to brightness and the proportion of white it contains. Together, saturation and chroma determine how pure a hue is. The more saturated a hue, the less grey it contains. Conversely, the more desaturated a colour is, the closer it approaches neutral grey (having a saturation value of zero). The luminosity (also referred to as lightness or value) of a colour describes its luminous intensity. Luminosity only has achromatic value, meaning it only refers to how light or dark a colour is.⁹³

⁹³ Images taken from: (a) Foster, 2014: p. 49, (b) Sappi, 2013: p. 2 and (c) Sutori, n.d.

While many are familiar with the two-dimensional colour wheel (Figure 25a), it is a highly simplified diagram showing the basic relations between colours (i.e., primary, secondary, complementary, etc.) and only represents hues, effectively a plane section. In colour solids (Figure 25b), the colour wheel is the outer rim, lightness is the centre axis in the middle and saturation are like spokes emanating from the centre to the rim. In colour spheres, contrast is relatively differentiated on the colour *and* value axes, so its increases (or decreases) represent depth (Figure 25c). The value scale is determined by the digital camera's dynamic stop range (the ARRI ALEXA's range is given in Chapter 5) and is ideally balanced in the 'shot' when the relative differences in colour contrast and value contrast are globally equal. Harmony is achieved when the two contrasts are affective, that is, when they relate to a sense of oneness or unity (Choudry, 2014: 130-138). Though many systems were devised to numerically scale colour, the various systems were standardised by the international authority on light, the *Commission Internationale De L'Eclairage* (International Commission on Illumination) (CIE), into a family of colour spaces in 1931 (CIE, 2021).

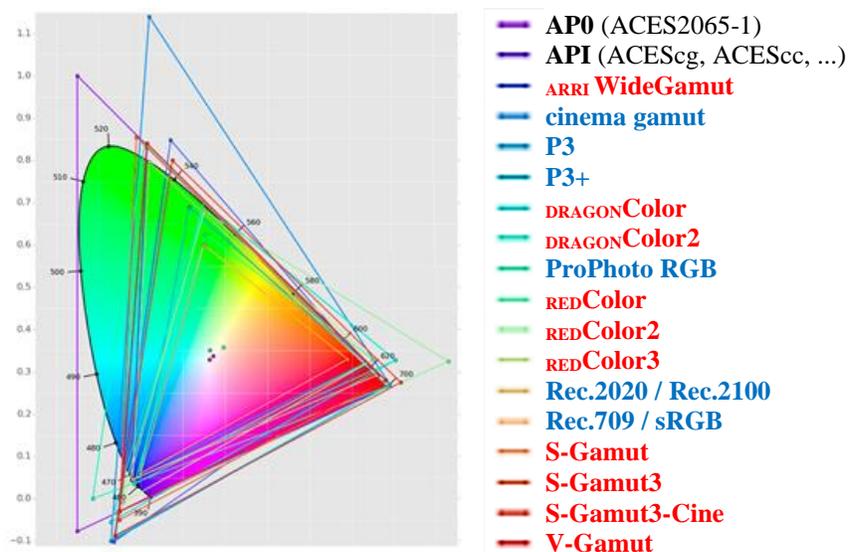


Figure 26 - digital camera chromaticity diagram with different manufacturer's colour gamut modified from Arrighetti (2017)

Arguably, the most popular system uses tristimulus values XYZ to define colour spaces, though some cinematographers and colourists use other systems depending on their preference for rectangular (RGB), algebraic (LAB) or radial coordinates (HSL and HSV) (CameraImage, 2019). THE XYZ tristimulus method has only three factors based on the primary colour (red, green and blue) receptors in the eyes, with all colours being some mixture of the three. While useful for defining a colour precisely, the system is difficult to visualise intuitively. Additionally, it is sometimes difficult to calculate highly saturated colours (Schanda, 2007). Consequently, the colour space was reduced to two dimensions, independent of brightness, called Yxy (where Y represents luminosity and x and y are the chromaticity coordinates calculated from the tristimulus values) producing an xy chromaticity diagram (Figure 26). The outer rings represent changes in hue while saturation increases as you move outwards (chromatic colours) from the centre (achromatic colours). The triangles represent the colour gamut of various cameras, indicating which colours the camera can reproduce.

I have omitted the mathematical formulae for obtaining colour values as this is outside the scope of my thesis and because cinematographers do not manually calculate these on set but rely on digital processing devices. Each camera manufacturer uses their own proprietary ‘colour science’ to give precise values and keeps colour and light compositions consistent. This may be done either continuously in on-set production colour balancing with colour meters or during post-production colour correction, depending on the cast, crew, camera and lighting equipment, budget and deliverables schedule.

Next generation luminaires like ARRI’s new Orbiter (debuted during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic) not only syncs with the shooting camera but has integrated colour meters, light

sensors, a three-axis accelerometer and magnetometer (for sensing pan, tilt, roll and heading). Moreover, the lighting fixture has software that spectrophotometrically accounts for the various conditions affecting how colours are perceived: differences in light sources, surface texture, angle of observation, size (or area effect), background and subjective sensitivity (or observer bias). Unprecedentedly, besides being fully weather and waterproof, the Orbiter even has a colour sensor mode (Figure 27) that reads the ambient colour surrounding the fixture and matches the colour with complete accuracy. This will make the DP's and colourist's job much easier in the future. Preventing colour assimilation in colour correcting suites will remain an unavoidable task, though this is usually overcome by painting the suites' walls in neutral grey (Mixing Light, 2015).



Figure 27 - light mode options on control panel for ARRI Orbiter (taken from ARRI, 2021)

APPENDIX 2 – PILOT STUDY: EXPLORATORY DATA ANALYSIS OF THE EDITING STRUCTURE IN *SCANDAL*

Introduction

I analyse the dynamic editing structure of the first (2012) season of *Scandal* with ordinal time series methods. I show the order structure matrix, a statistical tool for the describing the global structure of a time series, is a useful exploratory data analytical method for revealing the editing structure of television episodes without requiring *a priori* assumptions about the intentions of the program. Comparing the order structure matrices of these episodes, I find *Scandal* comprises multiple editing regimes with change points between editing patterns coinciding with large changes in mood and localised clusters of shorter and longer takes being associated with specific narrative events. The multiple editing regimes create different types of affective experiences for me with more slowly edited passages creating a pervading sense of submission and rapid editing linked to the frenetic action of crises management and deception, while the interaction of these two modes of expression confuses the emotional experience of watching *Scandal*.

Although the aesthetic experience of thrillers has been researched in films, in terms of its aesthetic paradoxes of pleasure (Hanich, 2010), scant attention has been afforded to television thrillers. As such, there are virtually no papers on the formal structure of contemporary television thrillers outside of introductory overviews and certainly no studies of their editing styles. This is partially due to a continued emphasis on representation and socio-cultural issues, but mostly indicates a lack of interest in stylistic analysis in television

studies in general (Bordwell, 2005) and the difficulties of analysing the evolution of television style over the course of an episode (and by extension, a season or series). In this pilot study, I aim to show how applying time series analysis to the shot length data of the first season of *Scandal* allows us to understand its editing structure as a dynamic system. Specifically, my goals here are to test the viability of Jeremy Butler's 'telepoetics' in determining if there is a common editing structure to different episodes belonging to this programme; to determine the key features of their editing structure by identifying changes in editing patterns and clustering of shots; and to understand the functions editing plays in organising my experience by relating these features to the narrative content of these episodes.

According to sociologist Therese Baker, pilot studies are crucial 'to pre-test or try out' (1998: 182) one's research methods or procedures and to identify any potential weaknesses and inconsistencies in the early stages of the research project. Since my assemblage of methods is unique, at least insofar as the aesthetic textual analysis of television is concerned, my objectives here are to

1. Determine the time required to analyse a discrete episode
2. Assess the viability of the methodology
3. Develop the most effective sequence of methods
4. Identify any problems or difficulties that may emerge
5. Refine the description of the techniques to clarify any ambiguities
6. Establish a protocol for data collection

This study is organised as follows. Section two discusses exploratory data analysis as a general framework for studying television style, and I argue this data-driven approach has advantages over interpretational approaches to television style. Section three sets out the methods used in this paper and the episodes analysed, while section four demonstrates the use of ASL data and of the order structure matrix as an exploratory method of time series analysis. The preliminary results are presented in section five, with each of the episodes discussed collectively to understand how the editing of each episode functions and perhaps to derive some preliminary conclusions about the structure and functions of editing in *Scandal*. Finally, section six will address the objectives.

A. Exploratory data analysis and televisual aesthetics

Television style is the systematic deployment of the techniques of cinematography (mise en scène, framing, editing, sound, etc.), and television aesthetics is the study of the arrangement of a programme's constitutive stylistic elements at different relational scales (i.e., shot, scene, episode, season, series). According to Jacobs and Peacock (2013), the purpose of stylistic analysis in television aesthetics may be *classificatory*, differentiating between periods, movements, or genres; or *explanatory*, accounting for the presence or absence of stylistic elements in a programme, the formal relations between them, and the functions they fulfil. As an appraisal of the key televisual aesthetics in the US television thriller *Scandal*, this paper falls predominately into the latter category.

With the scope to investigate 'beyond the competent, descriptive observation of textual details, towards a personal and powerful response to a programme and consequent detailed analysis' (Cardwell, 2006: 74), this study explores how average shot length (ASL)

data can be used to explain how I begin to make sense of the programme's underlying structure by extracting its relevant details and statistically mapping their formal relationships. Although renowned film theorist and historian David Bordwell famously used ASL to 'as a way of tracking individual directors' styles, as well as trends within film history generally,'⁹⁴ it is Jeremy Butler (2010) who proposed that the analysis of ASL data could be exported to television studies. His 'telepoetics' is particularly fruitful to the studies of television style [as] is the notion of schemas, [because it] enables the researcher to characterize accurately the stylistic traits of certain modes of production and discuss their function and significance' (2010: 21).

This functionality (as distinguished from intentionality) is important because it provides the basis for the criterion I will later use in indexing and organising the complex interdependencies of the specific aesthetic elements in each text, especially with regards to my affective evaluation. However, as Gibbs and Pye (2005) point out,

at the level of the individual [text] the mere presence of a formal element means very little. It is only when we consider the specific decision within the context in which it appears, including the content to which it gives form, that we can grasp its significance...The status of formal decisions, not simply the choice of a particular technique, is always crucial to their significance, and status can only be determined by interpretation (11).

⁹⁴ Bordwell observes that the measuring of ASL data in film studies has been around for many years. He notes how 'Barry Salt used it to average his ASLs for a given period (e.g., the 1920s, the 1930s, etc.) to come up with a Mean Average Shot Length for the period. He then compared this with the MASL of other periods.' Even as far back as 1926, 'German writer Georg Otto Stindt proposed an early version of ASL analysis when he compared the number of shots per reel in German films and in US films and commented that American films tended to increase the shot length as the film approached its climax, while German films didn't' (Bordwell, n.d.).

But that still begs the dual question ‘*how/what* exactly am I looking at?’ Geraghty (2003) suggests using ‘a number of processes to build up an analytic description that entails not only the categorization of texts inside ‘broad generic distinctions’ to facilitate comparisons but also, textual analyses in which ‘emotion finds expression’ (2003: 33). This ground-up layering approach to television aesthetics is an exploratory analysis that functions as an introductory map to what I feel and understand as being significant in the texts, yet ‘avoids description as an end in itself’ (Redfern, 2012).

As the first step then, using exploratory data analysis (EDA) as a philosophical state of mind wherein few, if any, a priori assumptions about the text are made, allows the data to ‘speak for itself.’ As Redfern argues, EDA is characterised by an *openness* to techniques and tools that make it easier to identify patterns in the data early in the research, arguing that a ‘well conducted exploratory stage can reduce or even remove the need for subsequent statistical testing’ (Redfern, 2012: 3). While I initially questioned the suitability of using quantitative data in a qualitative thesis, its value lies in its ability to not only to identify patterns but also the outliers and anomalies that might otherwise be overlooked due to bias or simple human error.

Additionally, it provides material, that is, universal support for the claims I make. Furthermore, it presents and indicates to the reader that I am committed to analysis and building theory within the field of television aesthetics, ‘not just capturing what is going on in an individual life or socio-cultural environment’ (Pace, 2012: 6). This is not the positivist theory that is used to test hypotheses but rather, as Pace continues, ‘refers to theory that explains how and why something happened – theory that yields conjectures and a potential basis for future research’ (2012: 7).

This is not to claim that the graphical analysis of ASL data replaces the television text in question. On the contrary, EDA is conducted with the intention to return to the television text. Whether that ‘text’ is understood as a series, a shot, or somewhere in between, EDA has a range of graphical techniques at its disposal – histograms, data tours, finding clusters, visualizing clusters, exploring distribution shapes, multivariate visualisation,⁹⁵ etc. – however, since I want to explore the evolution of *Scandal*’s televisual style over *time* (and recalling its quality as one of Zettl’s five televisual aesthetic factors – light, colour, space, time/motion, and sound) – a time-ordered graphical analysis of the first is selected for this initial pilot study since it is a simplified rendering of the text that presents an overview of it as a whole while gesturing towards the significant details contained therein.

Crucially, since the observation of televisual aesthetics is subjective and analysing the evolution of just a single element of style over the course of a programme is a daunting undertaking given the complexity of the system of style, the graphical representations used allow me to more objectively ‘reveal the editing structure of a [programme] by identifying the underlying trend, the presence of cycles and clusters of shots, and interesting features’ (Redfern, 2012: 13) and other more subtly affective dynamics to the reader’s attention. To be clear, at this point I make no *a priori* assumptions as to the intentionality of the editing schema in *Scandal*, although I proceed only with the feeling that every televisual aesthetic feature has a function, that that function contributes to (or diminishes) its affectivity in relation to one’s subjective experience and perception. As such, the praxis of television aesthetics is to evaluate the particularities that enable one ‘to see a series differently,

⁹⁵ These terms represent the variety of tools than could potentially be used to when working with quantitative data (e.g., shot length).

providing a glimpse into one viewer's aesthetic experience and inviting readers to try on such vicarious reading positions for themselves' (Mittel, 2015: 207).

B. Methods

Data: I collected shot length data from season one of *Scandal* (Table 3). The choice of episode is governed by *time* – I began with the first season here and will move towards the current over the course of the full project – to establish the evolution of the programme's style as the programme progresses in the given series. Since I define the series as the interval which contains all the data (the season) and provides an indication of statistical dispersion, it is measured in the same units as the data (shot length) but labelled as episodes. These episodes were converted into AVI format to facilitate their playback across a variety of platforms and programs and loaded into the Cinematics tool to be analysed *shot-by-shot*. Since *Scandal* lacks an opening title sequence, instead interspersing a brief title shot after the season recap, and since these sequences frequently deploy the 'flash,' it is included in the data; however, the closing credits are not.

Cinematics Tool: Due to the exploratory nature of this study the initial analytic, devised by Yuri Tsivian to enable 'a shared-use, open-submission repository of data collected by people who use the client tool and processed by the statistics tools' (Tsivian, 2015), the 'simple' setting was used. The 'advanced' setting can be used to precisely mark the key episodes that are categorised as critical *frame-by-frame* according to type, length, and colour code. Full instructions as to how to read the graphs are provided in the end, while the raw data can be found by searching for the title name at <http://www.cinematics.lv/database.php> and selecting 'Raw Data' from the menu.

Order Structure Matrix: The order structure matrix (Bandt, 2005) is a statistical tool that provides a global description of the structure of a time series, X_1, \dots, X_T [MY116]. It is appropriate for the exploratory analysis of shot length data, allowing me to identify clusters of longer or shorter takes, the presence of intermittent cyclical patterns, and to locate change points in the editing of an episode that can then be analysed in more detail. The matrix (mat) compares the values of pairs of points at times s and t , where $1 \leq s, t \leq T$, and to construct the matrix I assign a value of 1 if $x_s \geq x_t$ and a value of 0 if $x_s < x_t$. Assigning colours to these values (1 = black, 0 = white), I obtain a graph that makes it easy to visualise the editing structure of a television episode (see page 131 in the man thesis text for usage in relation to frisson). The matrix is reflected in the main diagonal and I use the transpose of the order matrix to distinguish more easily editing patterns, *representing shorter shots which tend to cluster as white columns and longer takes that may occur in isolation as black columns*. The formula used to obtain the graphs can be found at the end of the study.

Title	Writer	Director	Editor(s)
1. Sweet Baby	Shonda Rhimes	Paul McGuigan	Matthew Ramsey
2. Dirty Little Secrets	Heather Mitchell	Roxann Dawson	Matthew Ramsey
3. Hell Hath No Fury	Matt Byrne	Allison Liddi-Brown	Matthew Ramsey
4. Enemy of the State	Richard E. Robbins	Michael Katleman	Matthew Ramsey
5. Crash and Burn	Mark Wilding	Steve Robin	Matthew Ramsey, Gregory T. Evans
6. The Trail	Jenna Bans	Tom Verica	Matthew Ramsey
7. Grant: For the People	Shonda Rhimes	Roxann Dawson	Gregory T. Evans

Table 2 - *Scandal* Season One episodes released between 5 April 2012 – 17 May 2012

Episode	Length	Shots	Min	Q1	Median	Q3	Max
1	2,659.7	956	0.1	1.3	2.0	3.1	67.1
2	2,542.8	856	0.3	1.4	2.1	3.3	33.5
3	2,555.3	757	0.3	1.6	2.4	4.0	42.7
4	2,566.6	805	0.2	1.6	2.4	3.8	35.0
5	2,555.7	850	0.4	1.5	2.4	3.8	17.2
6	2,555.4	786	0.3	1.5	2.2	3.6	57.4
7	2,557.3	793	0.1	1.4	2.3	4.0	

Table 3 - Descriptive statistics of *Scandal* Season One episodes (in seconds)

C. Preliminary Results

Scandal Episode 1: Sweet Baby (ASL: 2.8 MSL: 2 MSL/ASL: 0.71 LEN: 44:19.7 NoS: 956

MAX: 67.1 MIN: 0.1 Range: 67 StDev: 3.2 CV: 1.16)

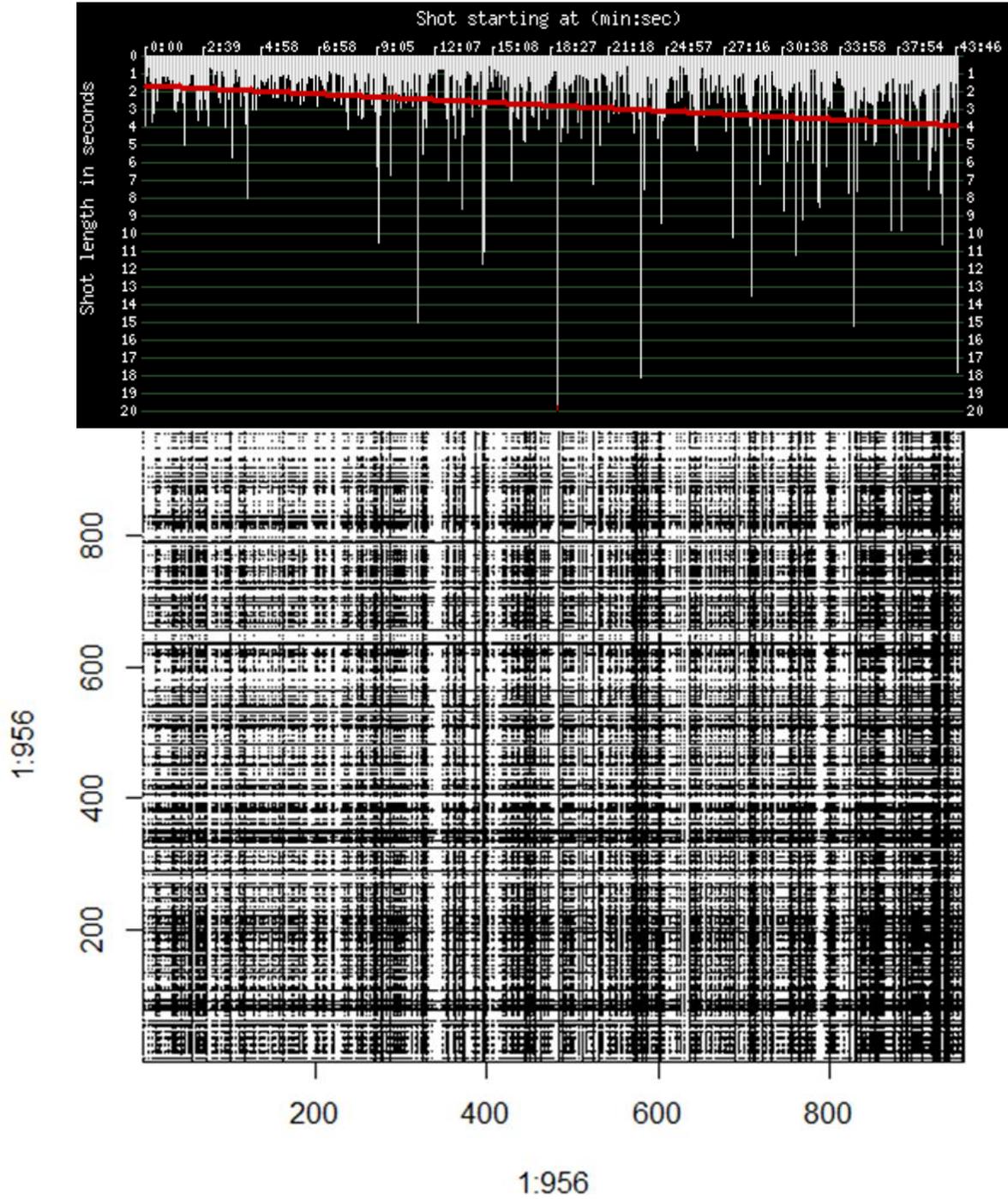


Figure 28 – Scandal episode 1 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix

Scandal Episode 2: Dirty Little Secrets (ASL: 3 MSL: 2.1 MSL/ASL: 0.7 LEN: 42:22.8 NoS:
856 MAX: 33.5 MIN: 0.3 Range: 33.2 StDev: 3 CV: 1.01)

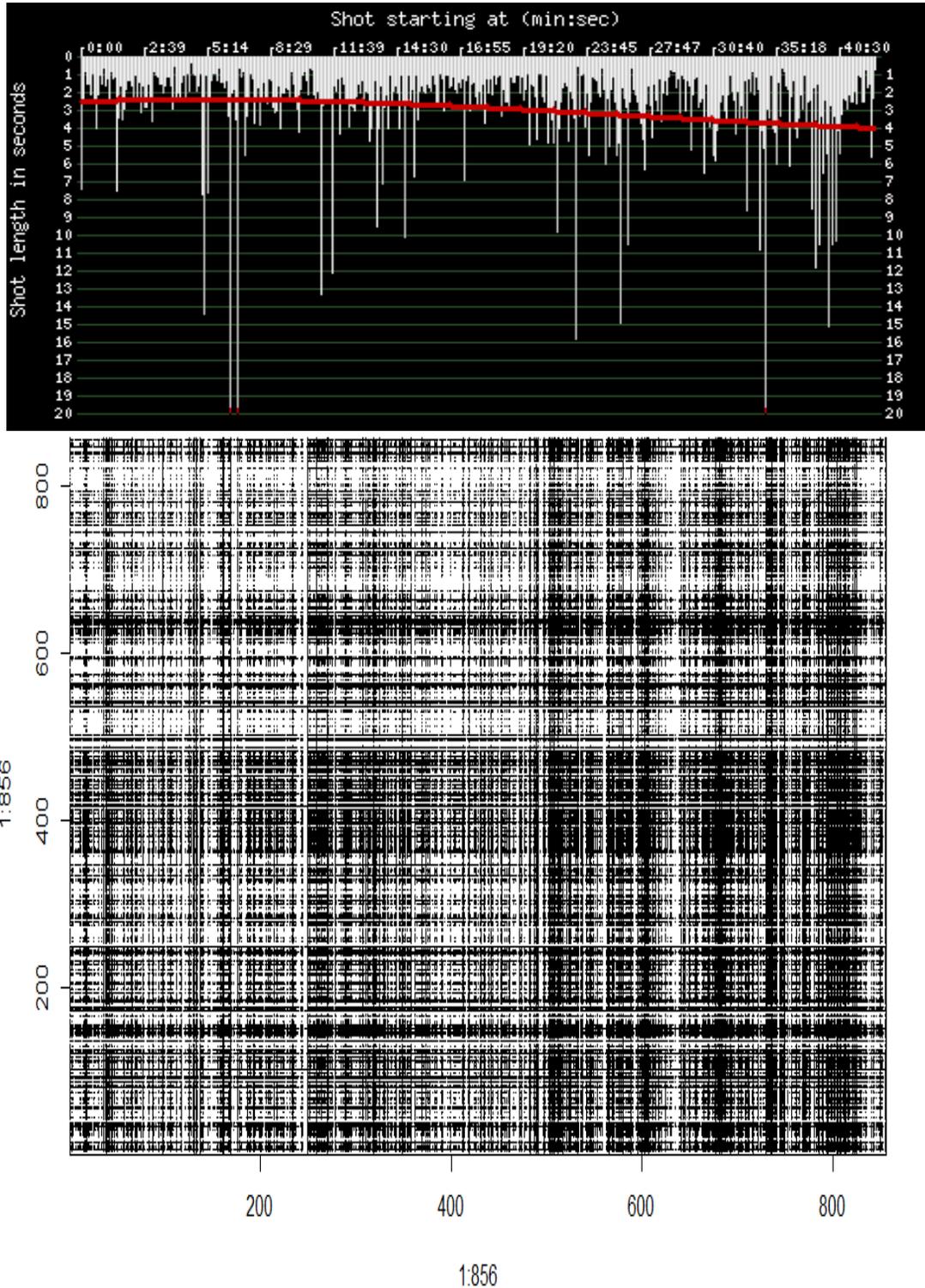


Figure 29 – Scandal episode 2 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix

Scandal Episode 3: Hell Hath No Fury (ASL: 3.4 MSL: 2.4 MSL/ASL: 0.71 LEN: 42:35.3

NoS: 757 MAX: 42.7 MIN: 0.3 Range: 42.4 StDev: 3.3 CV: 0.97)

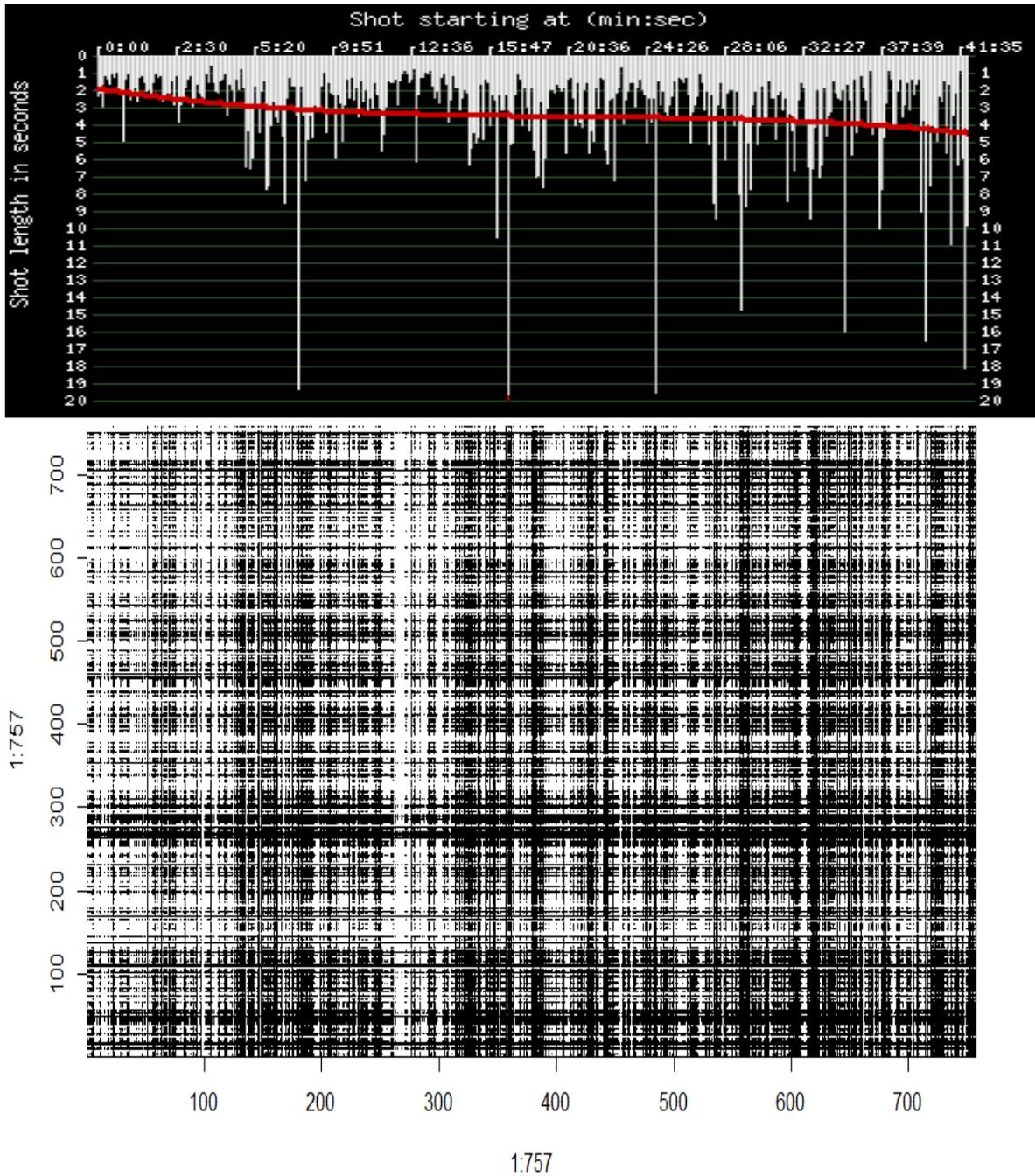


Figure 30 – Scandal episode 3 ASL graph and order srstructure matrix

Scandal Episode 4: Enemy of the State (ASL: 3.2 MSL: 2.4 MSL/ASL: 0.75 LEN: 42:46.6

NoS: 805 MAX: 35 MIN: 0.2 Range: 34.8 StDev: 2.8 CV: 0.87)

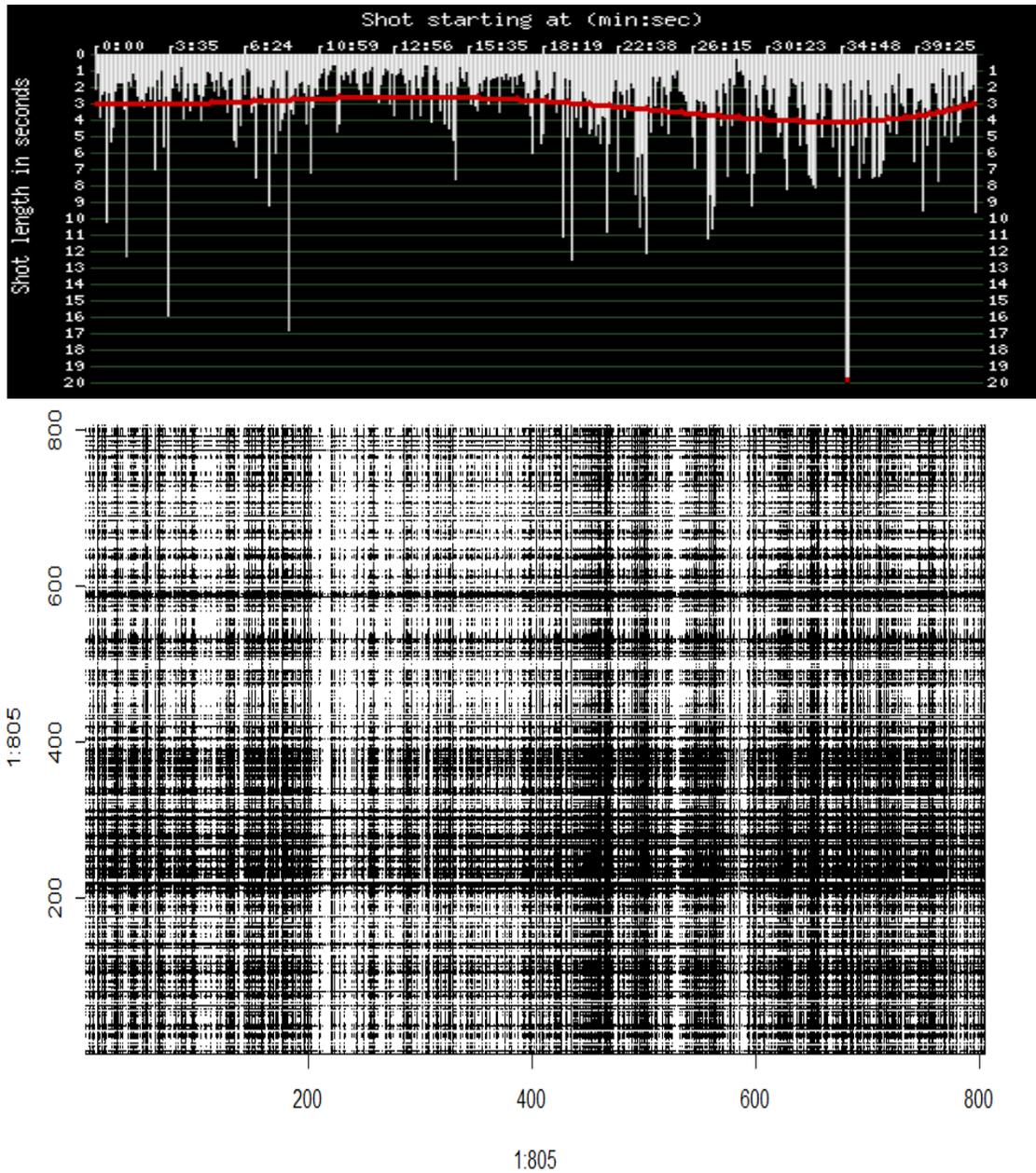


Figure 31 – Scandal episode 4 ASL graph and order srstructure matrix

Scandal Episode 5: Crash and Burn (ASL: 3 MSL: 2.4 MSL/ASL: 0.8 LEN: 42:35.7 NoS:
850 MAX: 17.2 MIN: 0.4 Range: 16.8 StDev: 2.3 CV: 0.77)

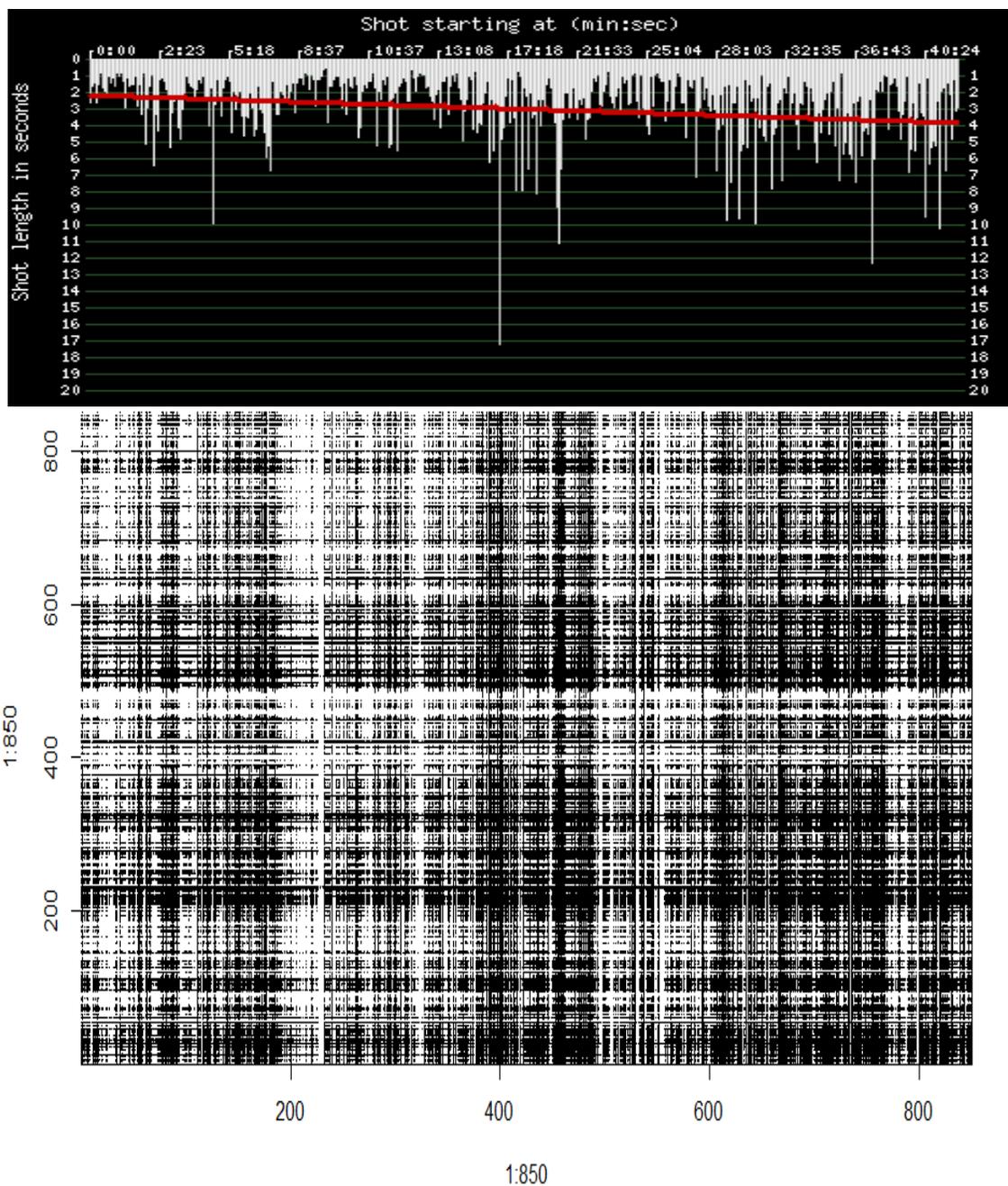


Figure 32 – Scandal episode 5 ASL graph and order srstructure matrix

Scandal Episode 6: The Trail (ASL: 3.3 MSL: 2.2 MSL/ASL: 0.67 LEN: 42:35.4 NoS: 786
MAX: 57.4 MIN: 0.3 Range: 57.1 StDev: 3.8 CV: 1.15)

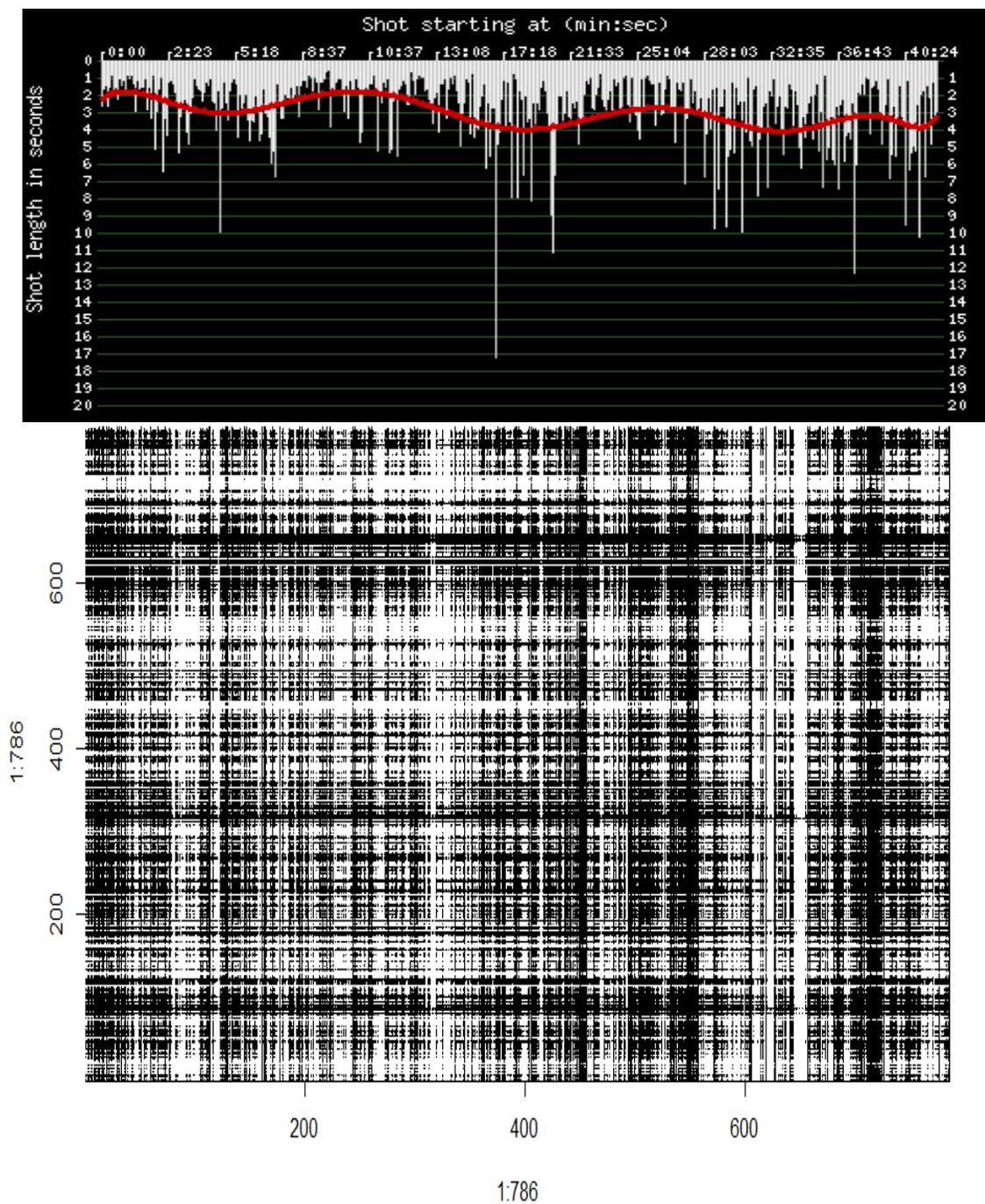


Figure 33 – Scandal episode 6 ASL graph and order srstructure matrix

Scandal Episode 7: Grant: For the People (ASL: 3.2 MSL: 2.3 MSL/ASL: 0.72 LEN: 42:37.3

NoS: 793 MAX: 22.1 MIN: 0.1 Range: 22 StDev: 2.9 CV: 0.89)

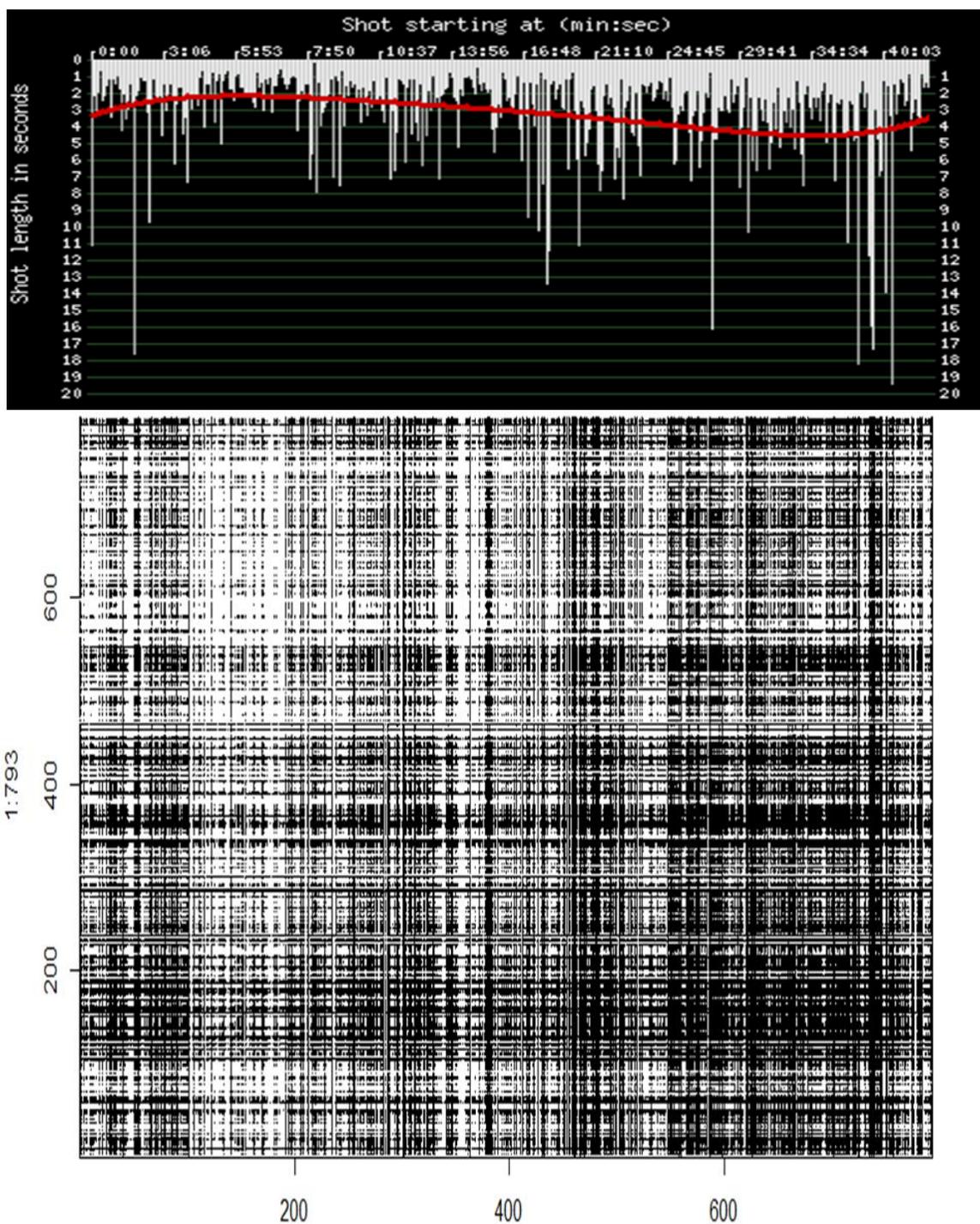


Figure 34 – Scandal episode 7 ASL graph and order srtructure matrix

D. Discussion

The first season of *Scandal* presents me with some interesting observations. In the first instance, by using the statistical techniques above to explore the internal temporality of the programmes, I am already able to identify some consistent patterns and points for further inquiry. Because *Scandal* regularly airs on broadcast television, it follows that there are commercial breaks. Aside from the pilot episode, *Scandal* has the typical 4-break format of recap-content-content-break-content-break-content-break-content-break-content. This format is the same for every episode that runs with approximately 43 minutes of content. The breaks are clearly visible in the matrices and so divide each episode into five principal parts. *Scandal* is constrained by the interruptions imposed on it by broadcast television standards. However, it countenances this problem in a variety of ways (the flash, bevellation, transparency) which will form separate points of inquiry in the main thesis.

Exemplified in episodes 2 and 7, *Scandal* alters the pacing of its narrative and changes its rhythm to align with the breaks. Its core affect, perceived thus far, is anticipation. To express this, *Scandal* uses extremely short shots; the ASL for season one is 3.09s with episodes ranging from 2.3s to 3.4s. The rapid succession of shots, many of them extremely short, *instils a material anxiety in prescience* that forces me to remain attentive to the sequence so I do not miss anything. Except what I do know is that the break is about to come. In fact, an error that occurs within the simple Cinematics mode was the rapidity of the shots makes it practically impossible to render accurate shot length; the advanced mode needs to be used to make it frame accurate and not confound transitions. The cut rate increases so rapidly around the boundaries s , t – oddly, this is usually only on one side – that it not only creates an inequality of expectation but one which is also precisely balanced with its aural

components. For instance, the establishing sequence in episode one is only 1.69s but manages to compress in 16 different shots! It also introduces us to the first aesthetic trope of the series – the flash. The flash in *Scandal* operates on many dimensions – as flashback, as photos taken, as boundary marker, as surveillance, as pressure released, simply as a flash – but it also uses it as double that is always accompanied by the flashing sound of a camera shutter that transcends the diegetic boundaries by interpolating within the narrative and between us (as viewers).

The most conspicuous feature that we can see in *Scandal* is its shift in the editing pattern during the last third of a given episode. This is akin to the three act structure common to film-making, but which also extends to other media such as plays, poetry, and novels. Due to this regularity, there is a tendency to recap and then introduce the current sub-plot and characters for the first 220 – 250 noticeably short shots. The build-up of the tension in the next act is accomplished with the break. Either before or after the break, there is series of shots (250 – 500) that incrementally increase in duration until after the break then drops. Generally, some secondary crisis erupts that follows the main season story arc which is related to the sub-plot but ties into the central theme in some way. During these segments, the arousal of a sequences is both heightened and intensified by increasing the event density via rapid shot changes. The major turning point in the cut rate occurs around shot 500. This shift demarcates the main part of the narrative from its denouement and resolution which generally occurs around shot 700. In this segment, the more intense the sequence is, the longer the duration of shots. As such, this shift also marks the boundary between the two dominant moods in an episode – a sense of fidgety yet determined impatience and the feeling of resigned acquiescence.

Being only the first season, the episodes analysed herein can be thought of as the opening gambit of the series. These openings ‘define our expectations and give them [the] shape’ (Geraghty, 2015: 240) that limits the degree of interpretation that is possible. Still, from their typeface alone, we can conjecture that both imply a supposed negative to be resolved, namely that one is not yet a woman and that one has lost face in the eyes of others whose opinion is valued. Thus, both their opening typefaces are used to show what I feel is necessary to focus on, that is, the *organisation of time* as it transpires to transform its subjects from one state of being to another.

Yet, *Scandal’s* genre invites by way of open possibility – it is a struggle to anticipate whether a current episode is about a new person, event, or some other public embarrassment, effectively heightening my anxiety. It is in the lack of knowledge about what scandal is going to unfurl that I am compelled to pay closer attention. These opening seasons are the ‘key moment of anticipation and risk’ (Geraghty, 2015: 244) that proceed in terms of a balance between familiarity and difference.

Other results include devising a table that groups the aesthetic variables into sense attributes and components, thematic coding, and thinking more specifically about the nature of televisual affective contagion in the process(es) of self-formation.

FORM	SURFACE	MOTION	SOUND	TEXT
position	colour	direction	tone	label
size	texture	speed	volume	FUI
shape	blur	acceleration	rhythm	
rotation	transparency		voice	

Table 4 – Proposed aesthetic categories of analysis

To be clear, the above table is not meant to be exhaustive, rather it serves to illustrate my current general categorisation of the aesthetic attributes. Components are not given as it is still a working model and one that varies across series. For example, the colour aesthetic has three components – hue, brightness, and saturation – whose existential description will vary depending on what programme I am talking about. Thematic coding dovetails into autoethnography due to the nature of EDA. It is hopefully evident that the open coding I performed in this study was a means to break the episodes into discrete concepts or abstractions of incidents that are self-contained within the series themselves. These have included considering the affective implications of shot duration and will extend to type.

Subsequent theoretical memos are reflexively written in the workbook while reviewing the data and re-watching the program leads me to look for relationships between the codes, concepts, and incidences to slowly build from the ground up an emergent theory of their respective styles. This mapping (hopefully) renders a complex, multimodal partitioning of feelings that separates a set of proposed emotional affective states into unique reaction patterns, especially utterances and facial expressions. Other emergent developments include the auto-stream, a time series of cognition, and familiarisation with the circumplex model of affect.

One key ethical consideration emerged in the pilot study: the acquisition of the episodes onto my hard drive. Though these shows regularly air on television in the US, I do not live there. In fact, I have never seen the shows at their normally broadcast time. Instead, I often access the shows via the Internet, in what may be considered a ‘grey’ area. I call it a grey area because, although it is not the producer sanctioned/intended distribution channel, Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled in June 2014 that ‘the on-screen copies

and the cached copies made by an end-user... may therefore be made without the authorisation of the copyright holders' (Court Fourth Chamber, 2014: §63). However, this judgement does not extend to copies that are saved to user's hard drive. A quick cost analysis shows that for *Scandal* with 113 episodes at €2.99 amounts to €337.87. This presents an ethical dilemma; either I can download for free through illegal channels, or I can spend approximately €350 per programme. My aesthetic sensibility demands a feeling of pleasure. The question then is whether I take more pleasure in subverting 'official' channels for the same content that is available from quasi-legitimate sources, precisely implying that my decision is a judgment of taste as to the distribution of beauty.

Since the simple setting of Cinemetrics permits live analysis, I used this method for the pilot. However, the issue remains because the frame accuracy of the advanced setting which I need to extend the shot analysis to type requires a saved rather than a streamed copy to properly function. It is amusing to note that there is a symmetry entailed with this course, as the either-or case would be an asymmetrical relation with respect to choice.

E. Synthesis

As stated at the beginning of this appendix, the purpose of this pilot study was to establish the practicality of my research. That is, to determine whether the project is 'researchable.' This means addressing the objectives set out in the proposal.

1. Determine the time required to analyse a discrete episode – Due to the fixed time it takes to watch an episode (30 → 60 min), coding errors (variant), and sample size (6-8 seasons), I calculate that it will take over 20 months to analyse *Homeland*, *Scandal* and *House of Cards* using this method alone. During this project it is assumed that both series will

continue to be broadcast and so an additional complete season for each would add another two months. All these factors together, including the **rewind [MY117]** function, depend on which programme is being analysed. The institutional time limits of thesis completion and the need to use other methods of stylistic analysis vitiates the utility of this method.

2. Assess the viability of the methodology – It is too unwieldy to analyse more than one programme unless I ‘select’ episodes rather than use all of them. At this stage, the research methods used appear to be more favourably biased towards *Scandal*. Opting to use only one programme, while it would enable a rigorous and more refined immersion in the text, would cause it to suffer from a lack of comparison. On the other hand, a research project that focused solely on *Scandal* would also facilitate further research on Shonda Rhimes’ other creative endeavours to comparatively assess their aesthetic ambitions and generate a compendium of sorts. Since I will be analysing a grouping of political thrillers, it is therefore impractical to use this method due to time constraints and the much longer shots used in *Homeland* and *House of Cards*.
3. Develop the most effective sequence – source the episodes as discrete AVI files → label and save them to external hard drive (ethical question) → run through Cinematics → read into R Studio → obtain and save descriptive statistics and matrix → thematic coding in workbook → rewind → rewatch
4. Identify any problems or difficulties that may emerge – As noted earlier, ethical issues have already risen which will impact the rate at which the programmes can be analysed. Moreover, the time consumption of the advanced mode prevents me from completing other analysis methods or completing other research tasks.

5. Refine the description of the terms to clarify any ambiguities – Some terms need to be distinguished so they are not phonetically confused. For instance, series not only labels the programme, but it also represents the largest unit of analysis *and* names it as time-valued statistical function. Speaking of units, it seems fitting to indicate the scalar used as being:

frame \leq shot \leq scene \leq episode \leq season \leq series

These are all measured in time (seconds). Interestingly, the terms sequence and segment act as subjective markers that objectively bounds my perspective so it can be read along any unit.

6. Establish a protocol for data collection – due to the many delays caused by casual coding errors, it became necessary to systematise data input. In the following, it is assumed I have already run the episode through the simple Cinemetrics analytic; additional features regarding shot type (i.e., dialog, action, title, etc.) are available if advanced mode is used:

- a. Copy raw data to Excel clipboard and save as ASxEy.xls; where A is the programme name, x is the season number, and y is the episode number. Edit the headers as ID, SL, and CUT to define the shot number, shot length, and cut point.
- b. Read into R Studio console with identity code

```
ASxEy = read.table(file = "clipboard", header = T)
```

- c. Convert SL and CUT into seconds (Cinemetrics records the data in deci-seconds) and name SL as a separate variable with the code

```
SL.ASxEy  $\leftarrow$  ASxEy$SL/10
```

- d. For convenience, summarise to obtain the descriptive statistics using the code

summary(SL.ASxEy)

- e. Transfer data to Word document before coding for order structure matrix

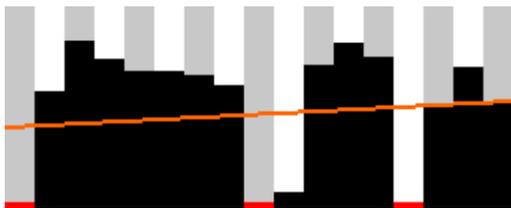
F. Cinemetrics

USING THE DATABASE (this section is taken in its entirety from <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/dbhelp.php>, copyright David Bordwell, n.d.)

Once you click on a movie in the database, you are shown its main statistics, statistics for each button (if advanced mode was used), and a graph of shot changes.

1. Interpreting the graph

If the film has up to 750 shots or more, the graph will be as many pixels wide as the number of shots in the film. If there are less than 500 shots, the graph will be 500 pixels wide by default. If the film is more than 750 shots, the step of the shots (see Adjusting the graph below) will be adjusted automatically to fit the graph into the page. The graph shows shot lengths from the beginning of the recording to the end, left to right, grey on black. A red line is drawn across the bottom of the graph, and a blue line is drawn across the top of the graph.

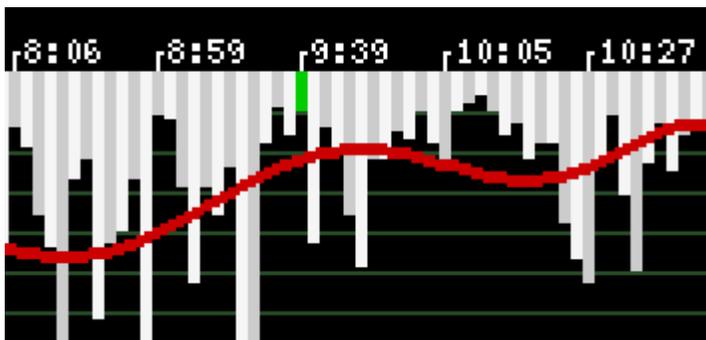


There is a column as high as the particular shot's length going from the top of the picture downwards for each shot. The graph is reversed, to show peaks when the shots are shorter and valleys when they are longer, thus depicting the film dynamics more intuitively. Each pixel in a column's height depicts one tenth of a second by default. The graph is 200 pixels

high by default, so it is able to show shots lengths of up to 20 seconds. If a shot is longer than the graph's height, the column will have a red tip, indicating that it goes beyond the image height.

2. Graph legends

The x-axis (time-code) legend displays a code in minutes and seconds of a shot's beginning time. This code is repeated every few shots, as often as the code length allows. The code corresponds to the shot that a little arrow to the left of it points to. In the following example the shot highlighted in green starts at 9 minutes and 39 seconds.



The y-axis (shot length) legend is connected to the horizontal gridlines that run under the graph every ten pixels. Depending on the vertical resolution setting (default is 10 pixels per second), it shows the shot length in seconds (up to one tenth of a second precision).

Adjusting the graph

1. The width can be adjusted by changing the step below the graph. This defines every which shot is depicted on the graph. For example, choosing 1 and clicking Redraw will draw every shot in the film and can produce quite a long graph for most films, while choosing 2 and clicking Redraw will only draw every second shot, thus decreasing the width of that graph by two. This has no effect on the statistics and the trend lines since they are calculated taking

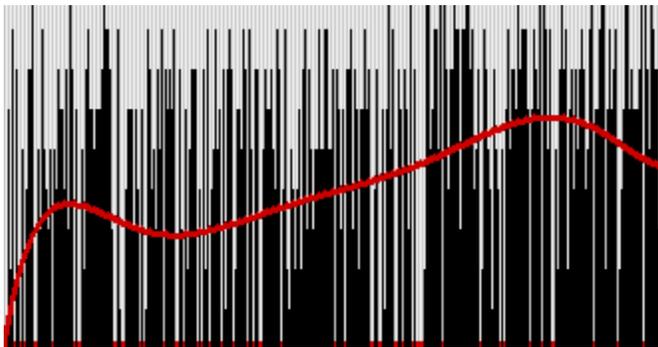
into account all of the shots and will stay statistically unchanged in relation to graph width. For most full length movies, the step is automatically adjusted to fit around 500-750 pixels when the movie page loads. In this case the word 'Step' is colored red and the stepping is displayed in the menu.

2. The number of pixels per second can be adjusted by choosing from the Vertical resolution menu and clicking redraw (default is 10).

3. Image height can be adjusted by choosing an item from the Height menu below the graph and clicking Redraw (default is 200 pixels).

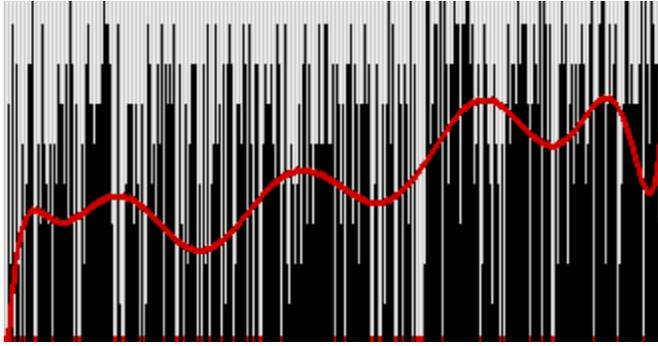
Trendlines

A least-squares polynomial approximation trendline is shown as a red thick line on the graph.



7th degree polynomial trendline example

Change the degree of the trendline by choosing a number from 1 to 12 in the Trendline: selection box and clicking Redraw. The default trendline is a linear trendline (order 1). Higher degree trendlines show more detail, but be careful, some trendlines might become quite erratic. It is important to choose a trendline that displays correct movie dynamics.

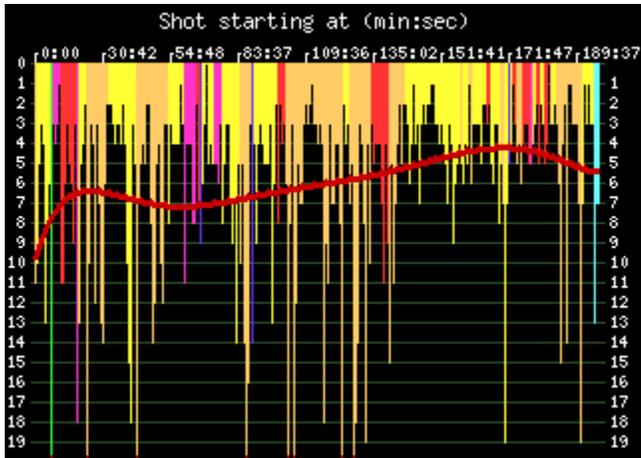


Likely erratic 12th degree polynomial trendline example

Some adjustments may be necessary to the graph size to make the trendline more obvious. For example, increasing the vertical resolution or step will make slopes and curves more pronounced.

Advanced mode statistics

If advanced mode was used to record movie data a table containing statistical data for each shot type will be displayed. It is possible to choose which shot types to display in the graph and which not to by marking checkboxes in the statistics table. Remember to click the Redraw button every time you make changes to the graph's setup. Also it is possible add a color code the graph, by choosing Yes in the graph's setup menu called Color code. This will draw every shot type's bar in a different color.



The particular colors are marked in the table above the graph.

G. Order Structure Matrix

Order structure matrices are a robust way of analysing the shot length data of television shows that does not require the use of any assumptions about a series, but rather looks only at the internal structure of a programme as it is presented, particularly if one shot is longer than another. Although as Redfern (2013) notes,

this method has a particular limitation: it is only really effective with large data sets, and it can be quite difficult to make out distinct patterns even when there are as many as 250 shots...If, however, you have 500 or more shots, then it is an excellent place to start your exploration of the shot length data (3).

Given the descriptive statistics from season one of *Scandal*, using order structure matrices is justified due to the exceptionally large number of shots in each episode. The code used in R Studio (open-source statistical software) to create the graphs is given below, where n is the number of shots and the variable SL contains the SL data. SL is obtained from the raw data

that is imported from the Cinematics database into the Excel clipboard and read into R Studio using the protocol established earlier.

```
mat = matrix(0, n, n)

for(i in 1:n) {

for(j in 1:n) {

mat[i,j] ← ifelse(SL[i] >= SL[j], 1, 0)

}

}

image(1:n, 1:n, mat, col = c("white", "black"))
```

The matrix of 1s and 0s is contained in mat (formula defined above) which must be embedded in the image function to produce the graph. The point of using such graphs is to be able to quickly identify where the points are in an episode that mark the expression of aesthetic constructs and elements and when they change as *functions in time* which can then be coded and used to search for relationships between shots and to further reveal the aesthetic structure and affects of scenes, episodes and (potentially) whole series.

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FILM AND TELEVISION REFERENCES

Title	Year	Director / Creator	Distributor	Adaptation (if any)
<i>All About Lily Chou Chou</i>	2001	Shunji Iwai	Rockwell Eyes	
<i>Batwoman</i>	2020-Present	Caroline Dries	Warner Borthers	<i>Batwoman</i> (DC Comics)
<i>Beautiful Mind, A</i>	2001	Ron Howard	Universal Pictures, DreamWorks Pictures	<i>A Beautiful Mind</i> (1998) novel
<i>Being John Malkovich</i>	1999	Spike Jonze	USA Films	
<i>Being There</i>	1979	Hal Ashby	United Artists	<i>Being There</i> (1970) novel
<i>Berlin Station</i>	2016-2018	Olen Steinhauer	Epix	
<i>Big Brother</i>	2000-2018	John de Mol	Channel 4	<i>Big Brother</i> (US)
<i>Black Panther</i>	2018	Ryan Coogler	Marvel Studios	<i>Black Panther</i> (Marvel Comics)
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	2008-2013	Vince Gillian	AMC	
<i>Bridgerton</i>	2020-present	ChisVan Dusen	Netflix	<i>Bridgerton</i> (2000-2013) novel series
<i>Dallas</i>	1978-1991	David Jacobs	CBS	
<i>Extant</i>	2013-2015	Mickey Fisher	CBS Television	
<i>Ferris Bueller's Day Off</i>	1986	John Hughes	Paramount Pictures	
<i>Final Cut, The</i>	2004	Omar Naim	Lions Gate Entertainment	
<i>Forrest Gump</i>	1994	Robert Zemeckis	Paramount Pictures	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1986) novel
<i>Game of Thrones</i>	2011-2019	David Benioff	HBO	<i>A Song of Ice and Fire</i> (1991) novel
<i>Get Christie Love</i>	1974	David L. Wolper	ABC	
<i>Get Out</i>	2017	Jordan Peele	Universal Pictures	
<i>Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> <i>Girl's Trip</i>	2011 2017	David Fincher Malcolm D. Lee	Sony Pictures Universal Pictures	
<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	2005-present	Shonda Rhimes	ABC	

Title	Year	Director / Creator	Distributor	Adaptation (if any)
<i>Handmaid's Tale, The</i>	2017-present	Bruce Miller	Hulu	<i>Handmaid's Tale, The</i> (1985) novel
<i>Hatufim</i>	2010-2013	Gideon Raff	Channel 2 (Israel)	
<i>Hawthorne</i>	2009-2011	John Masius	TNT	
<i>Homeland</i>	2011-present	Howard Gordon, Alex Gansa	Showtime	<i>Hatufim</i>
<i>House of Cards (UK)</i>	1990	Andrew Davies	BBC	<i>House of Cards</i> (1989) novel
<i>House of Cards (US)</i>	2013-2019	Beau Willimon	Netflix	<i>House of Cards</i> (UK)
<i>How to Get Away With Murder</i>	2014-2019	Shonda Rhimes	ABC	
<i>Inglorious Bastards</i>	2009	Quentin Tarantino	Universal Pictures	
<i>Inception</i>	2010	Christopher Nolan	Warner Bros. Pictures	
<i>Lilyhammer</i>	2012-2014	Anne Bjørnstad, Eilif Skodvin	NRK1, Netflix	
<i>Love Island</i>	2015-present	Richard Cowles	ITV	
<i>Mad Men</i>	2007-2015	Matthew Weiner	AMC	
<i>Marco Polo</i>	2018-2019	John Fusco	Netflix	
<i>Marvel's Inhumans</i>	2017	Scott Buck	Disney-ABC Television Group	Marvel Comics Group
<i>Marvel's Jessica Jones</i>	2015-2019	Melissa Rosenberg	Netflix	Marvel Comics
<i>Moonlight</i>	2016	Barry Jenkins	A24	
<i>Nationwide</i>	1969-1983	Derrick Amooore	BBC1	
<i>NYPD Blue</i>	1993-2005	Steven Bocho, David Milch	ABC	
<i>Orange is the New Black</i>	2013-2019	Jenji Kohan	Netflix	
<i>Our Planet</i>	2019	Silverback Films	Netflix	
<i>Panic Room</i>	2002	David Fincher	Columbia Pictures	
<i>Pygmalion</i>	1762	Jean-Jacques Rousseau		
<i>Queen's Gambit, The</i>	2020	Scott Frank, Alan Scott	Netflix	<i>Queen's Gambit, The</i> (1983) novel
<i>Santa Barbara</i>	1984-1993	Bridget Dobson, Jerome Dobson	NBC Studios	

Title	Year	Director / Creator	Distributor	Adaptation (if any)
<i>Scandal</i>	2011-2018	Shonda Rhimes	ABC	
<i>Scrubs</i>	2001-2010	Bill Lawrence	NBC, ABC	
<i>Seven</i>	1995	David Fincher	New Line Cinema	
<i>Sopranos</i>	1999-2007	David Chase	HBO	
<i>To Play the King</i>	1993	Andrew Davies	BBC	<i>To Play the King</i> (1993) novel
<i>Underground</i>	2016-2017	Misha Green, Joe Pokaski	WGN America	
<i>Veep</i>	2012-2019	Armando Iannucci	HBO	<i>The Thick of It</i> (UK)
<i>Watchmen</i>	2019	Damon Lindelof	HBO	<i>Watchmen</i> (DC Comics)
<i>Wonder Woman</i>	2017	Patty Jenkins	Warner Bro. Pictures, DC Films	<i>Wonder Woman</i> (DC Comics)
<i>Weeds</i>	2009-2012		Showtime	
<i>West Wing, The</i>	1999-2006	Aaron Sarkin	NBC	
<i>Wire, The</i>	2002-2008	David Simon	HBO	
<i>X-Files, The</i>	1993-2002, 2016-2018	Chris Carter	Fox	
<i>Zodiac</i>	2007	David Fincher	Paramount Pictures, Warner Bro. Pictures	
<i>24</i>	2001-2010	Joel Surnow, Robert Cochran	Fox	