

Received 29/05/2021

Published 31/12/2021

Thus Spoke Underwood: The Political Übermensch in the American Series House of Cards

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Abstract

A successful film adaptation is, simply put, the re-enactment of a previously crafted narrative into a cinematographic format. A ground-breaking film adaptation however, is that which draws on the original narrative, while creating itself the status of “Original”. The Netflix American series House of Cards is an Original adaptation of the 1989 Michael Dobbs’ political thriller bearing the same title. Though both fictional threads converge in debunking the deceitful and amoral character of a conservative party whip, the American version (through numerous metafictional techniques) not only offers an intense and devastating insider’s perspective of the present-day successful politician, but also recalls one of the most controversial Nietzschean philosophical notions: The Übermensch. The characterization of the series’ protagonist, Francis Underwood, as a teleological congressman insatiably obsessed with power and “devoid of human timidity” (Solomon and Higgins, p.76) is often cited as a contemporary Übermensch who, like Underwood, zealously strives towards his highest calling and contests traditional values which teach submission and render humanity impotent. The present paper aims at demonstrating that the American series House of Cards uses the Nietzschean typology as a springboard to shed light on the decline of faith and the modern moral lassitude in a contemporary world of politics chiefly dominated by hellbent Machiavellians who gradually helped distorting old values into their new realities. By the same token, the paper seeks to rationalize the success of such politicians in modern times as Masters, and how they are praised for their ability to overcome despicable mediocrity.

Keywords: American Series House of Cards; Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra; Nietzsche’s Typology; The political Übermensch; Cinematographic Metafictional Adaptation.

1. Introduction

[...] This is which opposes my engaging in politics. For if I had undertaken to go into politics, I should have been put to death long ago and should have done no good to you or to myself. [...]; the fact is that no man will save his life who nobly opposes you or any other populace and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the state. (Plato, Apology, 31D)

It is with these words that Socrates, in Plato’s Apology, hypothetically justifies his uninvolvedness in the Athenian political scene. As explained by Wards (2009), Socrates partly

infers that any just person who becomes involved in politics will be destroyed, thus polemically sheds light on the incongruity of “just men” in the corrupt world of politics.

Debating the morality (and immorality) of politicians by philosophers has been inexorable over the centuries. The subject became even thornier in the post-modern era, when notions like Collective Consciousness and Collective Mind (as the primary normative factors according to which morality is conceived) almost died out, and value judgements became subjectively constructed, while other concepts such as Machiavellianism and pragmatism (ruthless, oftentimes) gained a more substantial ground and became viewed as praiseworthy qualities every successful politician should possess.

Although Nietzsche could hardly be described as a political thinker (Nussbaum, 1997), his originally metaphysical views on morality have long been set against political theory, and his explanation of “type facts” is recurrently taken as an archetypal scheme in discussions of the hierarchical power-distribution. The Nietzschean type-facts, so to recall, are “either physiological facts about the person, or facts about the person’s unconscious drives or affects” (Leiter, 2020), which determine their inclination and predispositions vis a vis moral belief.

In this fashion, the present paper seeks to set off the Nietzschean categorization of humans, (the Overman, more particularly) against the cinematic characterization of House of cards’ protagonist, and seeks to extract similarities and differences with the aims of determining the typology of what ABC reporter Dooley (2014) qualifies as the “deliciously cold-blooded protagonist, Frank Underwood.”

2. Underwood in House of Cards: Ace, King or Jack?

Francis Underwood, though a merely fictional character created originally by British novelist Michael Hobbs in 1989, and popularised by the Netflix series House of Cards, became the epitome of successful politicians who quail at nothing in their ascension to influential political positions. Highly ambitious yet fiercely manipulative, Underwood never ceased to intrigue critics, philosophers and viewers altogether.

Underwood gained fame partly for his provocative, witty, remorseless and utterly resolute nature, for the well-crafted plot he dominated (for the most part), but also for the metafictional post-modern cinematic techniques, which amplified the aforementioned traits, and kept the audience engaged by offering them the privilege to be privy to the main character’s innermost dark and existentialist thoughts.

Similar to literature, using metafiction in film industry is meant to remind the viewer that the work at hand is fictional. This is what Underwood does every time he stares, winks or waves at the camera, or when (in the middle of a scene) he side-talks or confesses his intimate intentions to the audience. Fredric Jameson calls this set of techniques “self-referentiality”. Underwood’s self-referentiality accentuates the boundaries between the real world and the work of fiction, and stimulates the activity of the viewer, by breaking the fourth wall and clarifying every blurred event which may cause confusion. To illustrate, while everybody (in

the show) seems to be impressed with Underwood's dogmatic cleverness, he confesses to the audience that he essentially approaches it as show-business, "Do you know the main thing that separates a politician from the rest of the species? A politician is the one who would drown a litter of kittens for ten minutes of prime time." (S4, Ep9). Or else when he openly declared (again, exclusively to the viewers) that "Politics is no longer just theatre, it's show business, so, let's put on the best show in town" (S4, Ep8).

One other disturbingly alluring traits of Underwood, is that he the incarnation of the post-modernist anti-hero as "someone who disturbs the reader with his weaknesses yet is sympathetically portrayed and who magnifies the frailties of humanity. An anti-hero often reflects society's confusion and ambivalence about morality." (Morell, 2008, p. 44). One could make a case for Underwood's wickedness by examining his major antagonists as a calamity which Underwood helped the world getting rid of. Peter Russo, for example, who was murdered by Underwood, was a mere fraud, a hypocrite Pennsylvania congressman who parades as a good Christian, a devoted family-man and a loving father while, in reality, he was unable to get over his triple addiction, namely sex, drugs and alcohol. Zoe Barnes, who was also assassinated by Underwood, was an exasperating amorally ambitious young reporter who flinches for nothing to attain her goals. As a matter of fact, though the murdering scene of Miss Barnes was brutal (thanks, among other things to the cinematic flattering effects technique), viewers "were neither surprised, nor particularly upset, by her demise" (Aarons, 2016).

Other characters that Underwood removed out of his way were former vice-president Jim Mathews, Former president Garrett Walker and many others for the sole reason that they are "weak" or "care too much: "When we care too much it blinds us" (S3, Ep7). But from a Machiavellian perspective, Underwood's reasoning couldn't be more plausible: "For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain; there can be no mercy. There is but one rule: Hunt or be hunted." (S2, Ep1). But after having climbed to the top of the food chain, and becoming president of the USA, Underwood's insatiable hunger for power has him target the upcoming elections, since being "appointed" president is not fulfilling compared to "winning" the elections!

3. Zarathustra and the Will to Power: The Master, the Slave, and the Overman

Friedrich Nietzsche's revolutionary concept of Übermensch (which translates to Overman) is probably his most known idea after the Death of God. Introduced first in 1874 in *The Gay Science*, then later in his prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1880), the Übermensch, as opposed to the Last Man, is a new and better type of the humans who zealously strives towards their highest ideals, targeting thus their uppermost potentials. He "would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured" (Nietzsche, 1874, p585). The Overman's drive stems initially from his disillusionment with the pre-conceived traditional moral values (religious ones, for the most part) which, according to Zarathustra, "seek the exasperation of the [human] drives" (ibid), teach us blind obedience and submission and render humanity impotent.

The depiction of the Overman is better elucidated through another Nietzschean concept, that of "Will to Power" (der Wille zur Macht), since the ultimate goal of the "three

metamorphoses” the Human-all-too- Human goes through in order to become an Overman, is to “attain total self-mastery and ultimate power” (Solomon and Higgins, 2000, p76.). One of the reasons why *The Will to Power* remains predominantly misinterpreted is that its very essence was lost in translation: the German word “Macht” (power) designates “personal strength”, the notion of “political might” however, which is usually attributed to Nietzsche’s idea, is equivalent to “Reich” in German, which is hardly mentioned in relation to the Overman. (Aaron, 2016). Nietzsche further argues that *The Will to Power*, as it is the case with morality, is not equally distributed among people, and is determined by the natural type-facts. It follows that one cannot imagine one single morality for all.

In his book, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Nietzsche developed two basic types of morality: The morality of the strong-willed (Masters’ Morality) and that of those whose drives are weak (Slaves’ Morality). According to Masters, the notion of good is understood in terms of nobility, strength, powerfulness, courage, the sense of worth and open-mindedness. (Copleston, 2003). Kaufmann (1968), translating Nietzsche, writes: “What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? Everything that stems from weakness” (p.145.)

Likewise, men of resentment (slaves) “Are like eight-day clocks when wound up; they tick, and want people to call ticking—virtue.” (Nietzsche, 1885, p.79.). In other words, slaves lack the ingenuity to create their own moral values, therefore they “invert the existing dichotomy of moral values and consider it “evil” those who possess those attributes which formerly distinguished the good”. (Copleston,2003, p.404.)

That lambs dislike birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves; ‘these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?’ There is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: “we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb. (Nietzsche, p480–481)

Interestingly enough, Nietzsche views Christian morality a kind of slave morality, and regarded it as a calamity which weakens the strongest spirit of individuals, and thus, should be overcome.

4. Is Underwood an Übermensch? A Descriptive Correlational Account

In the light of the aforementioned facts about *House of Card*’s protagonist, it is undeniable that Francis Underwood is an amoral politician with utterly limited “conformist” redeeming traits. Yet, that he perceives the world according to his proper morality makes us question: from whose perspective he is amoral, evil or even good? Let us not forget that the series is a post-modernist production which goes beyond the pre- conceived conventional value judgements and transcends the traditional right/wrong dichotomy.

A priori, Underwood’s profile is that of a Nietzschean master. To begin with, his definition of Good and Evil obeys only to his world-view, and his ends and needs by extension, something which is in perfect concordance with the Master’s Morality as portrayed in all Nietzsche’s

writings. Moreover, masters, according to Nietzsche, embrace pain as a positive and indispensable step towards their enlightenment:

Who will attain anything great if he does not possess the strength and the will to inflict great suffering? [...]t not to perish of inner distress and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering—that is great, that belongs to greatness” (Nietzsche, translated by Kaufmann, 1974, p5.)

Underwood replicates this idea in the very opening scene of the first season, when he declares, while putting an agonising dog down, that “There are two kinds of pain: the sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain that is only suffering. I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this require someone who will act, who will do the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing” (S.1, Ep.1).

An equally interesting common point is the belief in the natural distribution of predisposition to power among individuals, and the innate proclivity of people to take control or to be controlled. Nietzsche’s theory of type facts turns around masters ruling slaves and then slaves retaliating by emotionally blackmailing (or so they hope!) masters. The analogy Nietzsche advances is that of “birds of prey” and “lambs”. He explains that “it is natural for lambs to fear birds of prey and call them evil, even hate them. But, he says, the birds of prey would not see it that way at all: “we don't dislike them at all these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than tender lamb.” (Nietzsche, p.481.)

A similar allegory is used by Underwood, as he refers to David Rasmussen (a majority leader), as” akin to being between a very hungry wolf, and a very quarrelsome sheep.... Let's see if he stays with the herd or joins the pack!” (s4). Frank clearly sees himself as part of the wolf pack, a hungry wolf who finds no remorse in attacking the sheep, and doesn’t even blink at the idea that he might be viewed as iniquitous. “He who cannot command himself is commanded.” (Nietzsche, 1885). Indeed, this very idea of “unfairness”, according to Nietzsche, is a creation of the slaves as an emotional retribution strategy. (Nietzsche, 1878, p.16).

By the same token, masters only qualify as “dishonourable” the disrespectful behaviour towards other members of the nobler class: “One could have honour and duties only toward one's own kind” (Nietzsche, 1886, p.260.). Underwood also appears to be of the same opinion, as it is best illustrated through his respect for his wife, while caring less about other slavish characters. It should be reminded however, that this master/slave morality discussion is by no means prescriptive in nature. As Kaufmann (1974) puts it: “Nietzsche was not endorsing the will to power any more than Freud was endorsing the sex impulse” (p. 246), which means that it would be wrong to assume that Nietzsche approves the master abhorring attitude brought against slaves.

Nietzsche’s primary concern is -instead- the Übermensch, which, as explained by Meyer (2016) “is not so much a person as it is a worldview” (p.67). the Overman proclaims his entitlement to create their corresponding morality instead of adopting any conventional standards. Roughly put, the Übermensch mindset is principally directed towards self-

overcoming, and their strength lies in their ability to control their own drives, which, must be recalled, does not mean to reprimand but “sublimate” them (Meyer, 2016). Nietzsche (1880) better demonstrates this idea of the “strong mindset” as follows:

I have found strength where one does not look it for it: in simple, mild, and pleasant people, without the least desire to rule—and conversely, the desire to rule has often appeared to me as a sign of inward weakness: they fear their own slave soul and shroud it in a royal cloak (in the end, they still become the slaves of their followers, their fame, etc.). The powerful natures dominate, it is a necessity, they need not lift one finger. Even if, during their life time, they bury themselves in a garden house. (translated by Kaufmann, p.252)

Accordingly, Nietzsche considers overmen they who are in perfect harmony with themselves that they do not need to control others. Underwood, in contrast, though partly driven by what he believes he owns, is evidently a slave to the Oval and his position as President of the United states of America. And his downfall, by the beginning of season four, is a direct outcome of his will to safeguard his office.

Richardson (1996) explains that the main difference between the master and the Übermensch is that “the master affirms other wills as a means appropriated to his own end, the overman more nearly affirms them in themselves, as contributing to an overall process made not more efficient but richer for their distinctive presence” (p. 70). He further clarifies that “the overman demands richness over efficiency, [and that] the overman affirms wills in themselves, not just for his own purposes” (ibid).

In this line of thought, one can recall Underwood’s help to Miss Barnes, by leaking information from the top-secret congress meetings, some of which made her noticed as a distinguished reporter. But in fact, the only information he imparted with her are those he took advantage from their leakage, which means that he was affirming her wills, but only to his ends. The same happened with Peter Russo when he was running for governor, he found a helping friend in Underwood, but later the events unveil the grander plan of Underwood becoming vice-president, a wall in which Russo’s success was only an indispensable brick. Besides, when these two antagonists’ missions were over, Underwood callously got rid of them in the most gruesome way. This does not, by any means, resemble Nietzsche’s Übermensch, and this scheming type of resentment corresponds- rather- to the Slave’s Morality (or to the Master’s Morality which enslaves him to his own ambitions).

More importantly, Meyer (2016) advanced an interesting theory which discards the possibility of Underwood being a self-overcoming individual: his unacceptance of fate and his indeterminism particularly vis a vis events which do not go his way. This trait opposes a central Nietzschean doctrine qualifying the Übermensch: Amor Fati, which chiefly translates to “love of fate” or “acceptance of necessity” (Ulfers and Cohen, 2007).

Nietzsche’s conception of Fate obeys to the same law according to which the philosopher presents his understanding of reality: the intricacy of opposites. In his first account of Amor Fati in the *Gay Science* (1889), Nietzsche equally made a reference to necessity: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things, then I shall be one of

those who make things beautiful. Amor Fati: let that be my love henceforth! And all in all, and on the whole: someday I wish to be only a Yes-sayer” (Nietzsche, trans, Kauffman (1974, p.223). Absurdly, necessity and freedom are part of the fatalism the Overman should believe in. To illustrate, in the *Twilight of Idols* (1889) Nietzsche characterizes Goethe as “ a spirit who has become free stands amidst all with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the faith that only the single and loathsome , and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole, he does not negate anymore” (Nietzsche, trans. Kaufmann , 1986, p.554). Otherwise explained, fate is not to be understood as an irreversible course of events, it is not an eventual sought achievement in itself, or a final state after which events come to an end. It is not fate in the sense of a categorical moral imperative to which we should blindly adhere. It is rather the continuous process that Nietzsche calls “Becoming”, which, once again according to the intricacy of opposites, negates “Being”.

Fate and the love of it involve us in knowledge, amounting to wisdom, of an excess (truth) beyond Being with Becoming as its negation. In a state of awareness that is beyond normative conception and that leaves him who “knows” it “only as a yes- sayer”” (Nietzsche, trans, Kauffman, 1968, p.46)

Amor Fati is a trait which is completely absent in the characterization of Underwood. “Becoming” a president of the USA turned into a mere “Being” once the goal is achieved. “When we lose because of you there will be nothing. No plan. No future. We will be has-beens.” (S4, Ep12). This was the endgame for Underwood, after it, the series’ protagonist stopped “thriving” for more, all he did was survive, showing more and more a lack of resourcefulness, thus accepting his state as a Human, all-too-Human!

5. Conclusion

Like many good tele-cinematic productions, *House of Cards* sheds light on the real-world through a fictional, yet though-provoking narrative. It perfectly does so by portraying a character who is enchanting and frightening all at once, piquing our interest and infuriating our uncertainties about the unfair and unscrupulous world of politics.

Through the series’ first five seasons, we watch congressman Underwood make his way up to the vice-presidency, then the presidency, committing clear transgressions with impunity, and making us wonder if, with many Underwoods around, our world is nothing but a *House of Cards*, ready to come down anytime!

Underwood’s characterization is also fascinating as it is not solely political, but philosophical as well, therefore it calls upon numerous moral and psychological critical readings, and no wonder that the portrayal of the protagonist as an ambitious, powerful and self-sufficient politician recalls the Nietzschean Übermensch.

The Übermensch is much more of a concept than he is an actual human being. It is the idea of being constantly dedicated to resourcing oneself, sublimating one’s world vision and deconstructing pre- conceived standards of creation in order to give room to new moral values and beliefs. Roughly put, the Overman is highly constructive “yet his work is not lawless but has structure and form” (Kaufmann, 2000, p. 250), and this , by no means, is Underwood, who, in addition to abiding by no fixed rules (not even his), accelerated his own downfall.

Once his aim of being appointed as president is attained, he devoted all his energy to maintaining this position instead of setting himself a new objective in life. Therefore, Underwood is no Overman.

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