

THESIS

FROM PARKS TO PRESIDENTS: POLITICAL SENSIBILITIES OF NARRATIVE
POLITICAL FICTION

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

FROM PARKS TO PRESIDENTS: POLITICAL SENSIBILITIES OF NARRATIVE POLITICAL FICTION

This thesis examines the ways televised narrative political fiction can portray political sensibilities. Using the NBC program, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and the Netflix streaming service program, *House of Cards* (2013-2016), I explore how narrative television presents political philosophies to audiences, equipping them to discuss political discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before we begin discussing the political implications of narrative television, I must first provide a narrative of acknowledgement. The MA program in Communication Studies is only a two-year program, and this document marks the end of that two-year journey. But I have been at Colorado State for five years. In a way, the last chapter of this thesis will be the last literal chapter of my five-year career as a CSU student. I wish to first thank the professors that transformed my understanding of the world: Dr. Thomas Dunn, Dr. Scott Diffrient, and Dr. Eric Aoki. You were my first communication studies professors. Each in turn provided excellent education, guidance and support throughout my time as a scholar. I will never forget your pedagogical styles and hunger for understanding the communicative processes of our world. Next I want to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Nick Marx, Dr. Karrin Vasby Anderson, and Dr. Doug Cloud. This thesis became a slow and difficult process, but your faith, support, and carefully crafted comments helped my writing and critical thinking skills immensely. I would like to thank my graduate cohort for putting up with my human foibles, and at times, my irascible attitude. I am thankful for you all, but especially Grant Campbell, Jena Schwake, Derek Lewis, Kristina O’Neil, Sabrina Slagowski-Tipton, Jordin Clark, Hailey Otis and Hillary Hawkins. You folks are smart, amazing people with bright futures ahead of you as scholars and practitioners of human communication. I want to thank my roommates Nate, Scout, Tim, and my brother Jon for putting up with my complaining. I am thankful you listened to my ideas, even if you often questioned how I could possibly get a graduate degree in watching television. Finally I want to thank my family: Jon, Joan, Mary Kate, Lindsay, Sean, and Nathan, who walked with me on my journey through graduate school. Thank you much.

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CHAPTER ONE: TELEVISION AND POLITICAL CULTURE

For the past two years at Colorado State University, I have lived with a history major, a sociology major, and two engineering majors. As an undergraduate and graduate student of television and media, I would often sit in front of the television to research and analyze film and television. Lovingly, my roommates would often chastise me for this behavior and remark on how often I would watch television, intimating that I was wasting my time pouring over media instead of “doing my schoolwork.” They would often ask how I could get a graduate degree in television, as they studied critical historical movements, or how to construct water efficient buildings. I found my roommates’ attitudes a bit disconcerting, as my subject of study was deemed less important than that of the other disciplines represented within my domicile.

As a retort to my roommates’ affectionate criticisms, this thesis is a negotiation of how television has influenced my life. As a child whose media influences were PBS, Classic Network Era television, and radio shows from the 1940s, I discovered how media encapsulated the historical, political, and social contexts in which they were produced. I took note of how many times Jack Benny would relay the importance of the war effort on his radio program. Archie Bunker was always confused about the changing demographics of his neighborhood. My belief is that television plays a large contributing part in the construction of our “terministic screens” through which all information flows.¹ This project, then, investigates the relationship between television and the political world.

Identification of the Case Study: Political Sensibilities of Narrative Fictional Television

Rhetorical scholar Barry Brummett argues that scholars usually adjudicate and criticize film, television, and digital media based on its aesthetic value, historical significance and psychosocial function.² Scholars often utilize critical theories of Kenneth Burke to assess how

texts function as “equipment for living.”³ Although Burke’s criticism is chiefly aimed at studying language and literature, many rhetorical scholars successfully extend this theory to analyze other forms of media, including television.⁴ This thesis contributes to the body of research that examines political television as equipment for living in a fragmented political society. Shows about politics are an equipment of sorts that invite U.S. audiences to confront their ever-changing understandings of democratic society.

Narrative political television can be defined as television genre explicitly focused on political settings and conflicts. Whether these programs exist in the White House or city hall, they present and discuss political life in the United States. Political programs are cultural artifacts that citizens interact with on a daily basis. Because of their unique prevalence within democracy, they provide an influential site of communication and rhetorical influence. This thesis examines two traditionally political television programs, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *House of Cards* (2013-2016).

This thesis investigates the following research question: How do industrial and textual elements in *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* contribute to conceptions of U.S. political culture through their selections, deflections, and reflections of reality? This introductory chapter provides the context for my larger thesis project. I first review relevant literature necessary to make my critical claims. Second, I lay out my critical methodology, which employs Kenneth Burke’s conception of rhetorical framing. Finally, I provide a brief overview of the chapters that will comprise my thesis study.

This study contributes to our understanding of how political fictions operate to promote a political sensibility. By political sensibility I mean a text’s *capacity and aesthetic aspects that promote a political message*. In order to study the themes of these programs, I utilize a rhetorical

framework to bring out the political themes of the television shows. Utilizing incongruity humor theory and the female gaze, I analyze how *Parks and Recreation* promotes a feminist political sensibility, asking the audience to consider all people as equals in sociopolitical life. *House of Cards* departs from this conclusion, and instead, adopts a Machiavellian sensibility, promoting a lavish elitism that portrays representative government as a class of scheming political entities. Both *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* portray politics in differing ways, offering “equipment for living” in a democratic republican nation. I will first explore how television has been framed through the years, starting with Neil Postman, and his oft quoted tome, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Literature Review

Because this project examines two popular commercial television texts, I situate it first in the literature that has debated the political merits of the medium. Neil Postman posits that contemporary society has fallen into a Huxleyan sensibility, borrowing largely from tropes found in Aldous Huxley’s dystopic fiction *Brave New World*. He contends Americans’ addiction to amusement has prompted people to withdraw from their civic lives.⁵ He discusses at great length how mediated communication like photographs and the telegraph system have been perfected through the medium of television. Postman claims:

To put it plainly, television is the command center of the new epistemology. There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest—politics, news, education, religion, science, sports—that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television.⁶

Indeed, Postman points out that television (and now all sorts of digital, mobile media) is changing the way in which human beings understand and synthesize information. However,

Postman does not celebrate this transition. In fact, he bemoans the technological shift, arguing that it erodes the public's ability to identify relevant and factual information.⁷

This condemnatory scholarship is not unique to Neil Postman or the 1980s. Communication professor Roderick Hart joins Postman in analyzing how the drama and speed of moving images create a false sense of motion and generates the illusion of “feeling” close to political and civic discussion without actually being involved in the reality of the public sphere.⁸ Hart asserts that even though the television brings us closer to political events, it ultimately distracts us from the realities of political involvement.⁹ Public intellectual Aric Sigman rounds out the chorus through a discussion of how television is destroying American culture, blaming it for the rising obesity epidemic, the stunting of brain development, and goes so far to claim that television is in fact responsible for more than half the rapes and murders in developed nations.¹⁰ Indeed, former FCC chairman Newton Minow's words continue to haunt television into the 21st century: the medium is nothing more than a “vast wasteland.”¹¹ If these aforementioned claims are true, then it is curious as to why Congress has not joined together to create legislation that would ban this pervasive, visual enemy from the American household. Such claims leave the television vivisected – its screen shattered and its components strewn about the family room. Because this project examines two popular commercial television texts, I situate this project in media studies literature that debates the political merits of the medium.

Reimagining Citizenship through Television

In recent years, many have pieced the television back together. The models these scholars offer discount the importance found within the messages of the texts. I align myself with media scholar Jeffrey Jones when he asserts that the aforementioned scholarship does not represent the “multitude of ways in which people exchange, process and engage in their day-to-day lives.”¹²

Jones signals that perhaps the conceptualizations of meaning-making are too rooted in classic understandings of citizenship. Communication scholar Brian L. Ott argues that where Postman and his followers find television debilitating, he finds it essential to managing a constantly evolving Information Age.¹³ Ott asserts that Postman's critique "is rooted in the standards of the old paradigm, namely linear rationality, seamless continuity, and focused concentration."¹⁴ Ott argues that we don't live in a world of modernist linearity, and suggests that new technology begets a new way of understanding information. He argues that television, "screens information, providing us with specific vocabularies and orientations toward the world."¹⁵ This new type of understanding privileges the image and the narrative over the words and exposition.¹⁶ Indeed, the information on television is filtered and differs based on geographic locations, cultural attachments, and sociohistorical movements. Ott asks readers to consider the important differences between news coverage of the Iraq War on CNN and Al-Jazeera. Television is not literature, and its form asks that scholars look at television in a more fluid fashion.

In the scholarly vein of Ott and Jones, I agree that television informs political discourse in a polysemic, multi-filtered fashion, making media literacy crucial to understanding the social and political impacts of the present day. In his book *Watching with The Simpsons*, Jonathan Gray asserts that FOX's hit television show *The Simpsons* enables viewers to construct and define their relationship with the public sphere.¹⁷ Just because the citizenry sits in front of a television does not mean it ignores political discourse. However, it might make the practice of citizenship more difficult. Media and communication researcher Kevin G. Barnhurst has conducted several studies on young audiences and how they consume news.¹⁸ He unsurprisingly found that youth generally do not watch traditional news or read newspapers.¹⁹ This shift in news consumption has led to concerns from political pundits, parents, and scholars about how lack of viewership

will lead to an inactive, inefficacious citizenry.²⁰ Studies have concluded that youth do in fact view late-night comedy shows, and watching those comedy programs does in fact have positive effects on civic participation.²¹ Ways that young citizens consume news has shifted from traditional forms like newspapers to late night talk shows. This assessment is helpful in that it informs scholars that ways of conceptualizing citizens need to change based on shifting technologies. In my thesis, I forward the scholarship of Ott and Jones, arguing that citizenship has changed, and television is a critical medium that forms and informs our positionality to political ideas. Jones and Ott leads the literature to a juncture in media studies that focus on the political efficacy of late-night political satire.

Much media studies scholarship focusing on political television dwells on late-night political satire. Late-night programs that satirize and lampoon politics are either seen as political good or political ill. Roderick Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius are deeply critical of *The Daily Show*, claiming Jon Stewart and his program was guilty of political heresy by making political cynicism attractive.²² Instead of teaching citizens how to have hard conversations, Jon Stewart taught how to “cop an attitude.”²³ Robert Hariman disagrees with Hart’s assessment and argues that Stewart used his humor to argue for the side of civic speech and gave viewers a humorous antidote to an already deeply cynical political culture.²⁴ The studies against late-night pundits are numerous, and many social scientists continue to rail against the negative effects of satire.²⁵ In order to more fully understand television’s contribution to political discourse, scholars are broadening our understanding beyond the “positive” and “negative” attributes of television and dwell instead on how television argues for political causes.

Media scholar John Fiske asserts that televisual texts have ambiguity – an ambiguity that provides viewers with the ability to reject or accept meaning.²⁶ Polysemic readings allow for

multiple understandings adding nuance and complexity to the way scholars approach and assess mediated texts. Texts can be more than simply pro-democratic or cynical. Fiske notes that fictional television often endeavors to resolve social contradictions.²⁷ Fiske concludes that meanings generated from television are the most important pieces of the social structure. The study employs rhetorical criticism to assess political texts for coded messages. The programs adopt frames for understanding and ask the audience to consider multiple positionalities to social issues. My thesis extends this body of research and situates narrative political television as equipment for living in a fragmented political society. Fiske and Newcomb and Hirsh are critical voices in this thesis project. I understand and allow for scholarly critique of television's anti-social position. However, I instead situate television as tool for engaging in politics, not as a way to withdraw from it cynically.

Narrative Television and Political Import

Scholars disagree on how it best to engage the political potentialities of television. Many media studies scholars often turn to a media effects paradigm to assess how television influences an audience's political views. While most media effects scholarship centers on news media, some studies test narrative television. R. Andrew Holbrook and Timothy G. Hill posit that viewing crime dramas significantly increase concerns about crime.²⁸ From a social scientific perspective, their findings proffer an understanding of how fictional television contributes to political attitudes.²⁹ However these studies do not account for the diversity of civic construction and action on the part of the viewer. Jeffrey Jones discusses how scholars should account for the political use of different media texts including fictional genres. He recognizes three flawed assessments that dominate political communication studies. Political communication scholars assume "that news is the primary and proper sphere of political communication; that the most

important function of media is to supply citizens with information; and that political engagement must necessarily be associated with physical activity.”³⁰ Jones instead argues that scholars assess the variety of media that citizens utilize in their daily experience.³¹ Some scholars have taken up this charge and have analyzed the important political messages of fictional television programs.

Karen Tenenboim-Weinblatt completes an intertextual analysis of Fox’s *24* (2001-2010, 2014), and demonstrates how the program invokes and expresses differing political opinions.³² She asserts that programs can trigger political debate and can be used to demonstrate political positions and influence public opinion. Texts similar to *24* that make use of political trends lend themselves to an “ontological openness.”³³ Ontological openness, in this case, refers to the text’s ability to fit certain interpretative frameworks that are not always available through nonfiction media texts.³⁴

Tenenboim-Weinblatt’s analysis is born out of the work of Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, who define television as a “cultural forum.”³⁵ Newcomb and Hirsch examine television as a medium that can benefit society by providing viewers with information. They first argue that a cultural basis for analyzing television bridges the gap between television as information and television as entertainment. In their assessment, most television studies assume a position that the audience gets unilateral political messages.³⁶ They ground their own analysis through the idea of public thought and action. For Newcomb and Hirsch, television programs “respond to real events, changes in social structure and organizations, and shifts in attitude and value.” They use examples from sitcoms like *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), which promote a “rhetoric of discussion.”³⁷ These programs make statements about issues inherent within American culture,

which invite discussion and deliberation. Sitcoms, they argue, may treat similar issues in different ways creating a dialogue across programs. Variations in tone, history, and style create the differences among programs.³⁸ Treatment of gender and other social issues will differ from program to program. Newcomb and Hirsch's analysis focuses on cultural and political issues. They regard television as a rhetorical text capable of providing a message negotiation among viewers. Their model of television recognizes the range of interpretation the medium of television can have. They end their assessment by offering television as rich and dense. Audience members make meaning by choosing messages that touch their own experience and identity. Such assertions will prove vital to my analysis, as there is evidence linking current narrative television to this paradigm. However, I wish to pause here to say that I study the text itself to analyze how these messages inform an understanding of political culture in the United States.

This model rightly discusses the way television can express opinion and invite discussion. However, Newcomb and Hirsch's landmark essay was written in 1983, an important time in television history. In the early 1980s, many U.S. audiences only had a few networks from which to choose, thereby creating large audiences that could theoretically deliberate these issues presented on screen. Today's media environment is more multifarious. Instead of a handful of broadcast networks, there are cable outlets, subscription channels, streaming services, and online-exclusive content. Consumers often partake in televisual experiences via laptops, smartphones and other mobile devices. Amanda Lotz scrutinizes the cultural forum theory and assesses whether or not it is valuable to utilize in a day and age where technology is constantly shifting.³⁹ The cultural forum assumes mass audiences are consuming the same shows and interpreting it in different ways. However, with the influx of different shows across multiple

platforms, this assumption is disrupted. Lotz adds that in such a multifaceted media environment, it is difficult for audience members to view the same content. She writes,

It is not likely that audiences see all of the variations provided by multiple series' treatments of a specific issue. With viewing distributed across a broad range of channel options, it is difficult to speculate about how many or even which types of shows a single audience member is likely to encounter and in what order.⁴⁰

In other words, Lotz invites scholars to consider the fact that Newcomb and Hirsch's cultural forum model describes a classic network era, and needs to be qualified as such when drawing claims from analysis. We must consider how technology shifts television consumption. Lotz's points are rightly argued in that they ask scholars to consider the dynamic nature of television.

An appropriate example of a qualified cultural forum model is evident in Heather Hendershot's short analysis of *Parks and Recreation*. She argues that the broadcast sitcom offers a "retort to the Right by insisting that government is a positive force that provides necessary, basic services."⁴¹ She reminds readers that television is about process and discussion. In her estimation, *Parks and Recreation* is an indicative text that captures the essence of the cultural forum. Hendershot's study is promising in that it uses a contemporary example and makes the case that in spite of a "post-network" era, television can still function as political discourse. Situational comedies have political import. I find that taking a nuanced textual approach is necessary when discussing the political sensibilities of a text. Rhetorical scholars look to the text as a way of uncovering political messages.

Rhetoric scholars have successfully conducted studies on fictional political television programs, underscoring their political import. Bonnie J. Dow specifically discusses how television has framed the issues of women's liberation. Dow argues that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is a significant and important text that served as a rhetorical outline for what could be considered as feminism on television.⁴² In the 1970s, many situational comedies were conversant

with the social change occurring at the time. Dow's studies suggest that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* "increased the visibility of feminist activism in the early 1970s."⁴³ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* created specific parameters for how feminism would be framed, adding to television's importance as a medium to present social and political issues.

Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles have detailed the importance of fictionalized U.S. presidents through their concept of "presidentiality." They define presidentiality as "an ideological rhetoric that helps shape and order the cultural meaning of the institution of the presidency."⁴⁴ They further delineate diverse types of presidentialities, each one creating a constitutive element to the U.S. In their analysis of NBC's *The West Wing* (1999-2006), Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles deftly analyze how presidentiality is constructed through fictional means. They contend that *The West Wing* depicts a heroic, humanized version of the presidency, one that simultaneously shows insecurities and weaknesses, but also militantly fights enemies with the unwavering support of a helpful, yet inferior staff.⁴⁵ The presidency imitates the familiar U.S. presidency, borrowing troubling tropes of whiteness, militarism, and masculinity likely to resonate with the U.S. audience.⁴⁶ Depictions of presidents on television are therefore necessarily mimetic, that is, they imitate public life which in turn helps to further define political culture as a whole. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles conclude by stating *The West Wing* "is a reminder that it is time to stop longing for the mythic hero's return. Instead, it invites us to seek a postmodern leader who may be flawed and conflicted, but who will succeed in bettering the lives of *all* who live in this increasingly diverse and complicated nation."⁴⁷ They conclude that popular culture may influence and impact a television viewer's conception of political culture.

In their assessment of texts that feature women as president, Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, offer rhetorics of proposition and supposition.⁴⁸ Sheeler and Anderson

assert that these texts simultaneously promote women as qualified to hold public office while also reifying notions of white, militant, masculine presidentiality.⁴⁹ They conclude that these problematic portrayals of women presidents continue to reinforce the fixed assumption that women are not qualified to hold the country's highest office. They concede that their discovery is not particularly surprising, but is politically important. These representations reveal why many women fail to achieve that presidential benchmark. The cultural proscription is too deep.

I add to Hendershot's analysis by continuing to look at political fiction as a text that can inform us on politics, and add that *Parks and Recreation* also promotes a feminist political sensibility, asking audiences to consider their own patriarchal predilections. As Dow, Parry-Giles and Parry Giles, and Sheeler and Anderson point to the importance of viewing television as public discourse, I too add my voice to this choir of scholars who investigate television, and reiterate how important it is to study this medium as a vessel for disseminating political topics. More broadly, my thesis contributes to the work of John Fiske and Newcomb and Hirsch, who view and analyze television as having potential for doing critical deliberative work. Now that I have reviewed the relevant literature necessary for my thesis project, I will review how I go about analyzing the texts.

Methodological Approach

This thesis examines how industrial and textual elements in *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* contribute to conceptions of U.S. political culture through their selections, deflections, and reflections of reality. The language of selections, deflections and reflections comes from rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, who argued that art forms function as "equipment for living," drawing on dramatic language such as comedy, tragedy, satire, and epic to argue how individuals and collectives utilize resources to address historical and personal problems.⁵⁰ When

events occur, discourse aids people in “coming to terms” with the event. Burke says that poetic forms “stress their own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his [sic] time.”⁵¹ Through Burke’s theory, scholars such as Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki have employed framing analysis, to examine how a situation or event is named/defined, and how that naming shapes the public understanding of an event.⁵² It is in this vein of criticism that I place this thesis project. As a rhetorical critic studying television, I am concerned with “the purposes, strategies, and functions that can be discerned from an understanding of the text and its potential interaction with audiences.”⁵³ For my analysis, I identify how industrial and textual differences in *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* contribute to conceptions of U.S. political culture through their selections, deflections, and reflections of reality.⁵⁴ I have selected these television shows specifically as they both deal with themes explicitly related to public discourse and political decision-making. In order to construct these texts in dialogue with political discourse, my method draws from Michael Calvin McGee’s theory of “fragmentation.”

McGee’s theory of fragmentation forcefully asserts “‘texts’ have disappeared altogether, leaving us with nothing but discursive fragments of context.”⁵⁵ Both *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* are two disparate texts occurring in different television universes for varying reasons. These two television programs provide scraps and pieces of evidence that contribute to a larger rhetorical message.⁵⁶ In keeping with Michael Calvin McGee’s concept of fragmentation, it is helpful to place these two programs in conversation with one another, creating a text “suitable for criticism.”⁵⁷ The primary task of a critic is to construct a text in order to understand the “invisible text.”⁵⁸ After becoming intimately familiar with both programs as a fan of the show, I began to see patterns and reoccurrences of themes and political messages. The scenes

selected for analysis were chosen inductively, as I found them illustrative of each program's respective sensibilities. For my analysis, I have selected scenes from various episodes that elucidate how political programs contribute to our understanding of contemporary politics.⁵⁹ Each program has hundreds upon hundreds of hours of dialogue, camera movement, and musical accompaniment. I have examined each text to determine the ways in which narrative and aesthetic elements frame political culture. My examination yielded two salient frames. This thesis extends a body of research and situates narrative political television as apparatus for understanding fragmented political society. Whereas *Parks and Recreation* offers Burke's understanding of the comic frame, and allows viewers to consider various ways of interaction with political discourse, *House of Cards* heralds a tragic, Machiavellian worldview. The programs about politics are tools that invite U.S. audiences to confront their ever-changing understandings of democratic society. The very fact that they present an argument at all denotes Thomas Farrell's assertion that "rhetoric is the only art responsible for the imitation and expression of public thought."⁶⁰ Both programs express and respond to public discourses that allow audiences to assess political discourse through differing lenses. I now outline the following chapters of this thesis, demonstrating how each program uniquely selects, reflects and deflects political sensibilities.

Chapter Overview

The remainder of my analysis will be presented in three chapters. In Chapter Two, I argue that Netflix's *House of Cards* imagines a presidency of Machiavellian proportions. The program's music, cinematography, and set design exude the premise that, "it is better to be feared than loved."⁶¹ I assert that *House of Cards* employs aesthetics of complicity, where the mise-en-scene, cinematography, and music all conspire together to promote United States

politics as a system that privileges political prowess over morality. I contend that this imagined political space comments on current political machinations and offers insight as to how this implication warrants further theoretical attention. This Machiavellian political sensibility fits into a “tragic” frame, which requires a sacrificial scapegoat who “suffers, dies or is banished by society in a symbolic attempt to rid itself of chaos disease and impurity.”⁶² The tragic frame requires the death and banishment of a scapegoat. *House of Cards* easily employs this worldview through the characterization of Frank Underwood, and his unending desire for political power.

Chapter Three examines *Parks and Recreation*, assessing how it functions to promote civic engagement and operates as a site of cultural exchange through the utilization of incongruity humor and the female gaze, offering a comic corrective to the questionable ethics in *House of Cards*. Next, I examine critically significant episodes of *Parks and Recreation* and display how feminist arguments are at work in the program. I conclude that *Parks and Recreation* exhibits feminist qualities and contributes to a more progressive political culture. I contend that this imagined political space offers a corrective frame to the *House of Cards* Machiavellian paradigm, and promotes a comic frame for understanding. *Parks and Recreation* recognizes that humans eventually recognize their shared experience and respond in an ethical manner.⁶³ *Parks and Recreation* offers a rhetoric that puts faith in the human community, and seeks for a reconciliation of the world’s ills, instead of necessary blaming found in a tragic frame.

Chapter Four considers the implications of these disparate texts and examines how television as a “cultural” forum operates in today’s media environment. I discuss how political discourse is not only present in political programs like *House of Cards* and *Parks and Recreation*, but also in programs that are not explicitly about political processes. I suggest that

narrative television is becoming more political, as the political climate becomes more divisive and derisive. This chapter also provides limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: PRINCELY PRESIDENTIALITY: *HOUSE OF CARDS AND
MACHIAVELLIAN SENSIBILITIES*

The Grand Old Party held their fifth primary election debate on December 15, 2015. The stage was crowded with a panoply of presidential postulants. Business executives, senators, governors and a neurosurgeon fought for camera attention, vying for the support of the American people. CNN primed the audience for a fight with promotional materials mimicking those of a wrestling match. Billionaire Donald Trump was leading the polls at the time, causing confusion and concern for some Americans as to the fate of the Republican party. A candidate who exudes all of the characteristics indicative of a reality television show, the opportunistic Trump used this platform to attack his fellow candidates, and a situation that could have been an occasion for discussing serious issues devolved into a shouting match. At one point during the debate, Donald Trump reiterated his plan to ban all Muslim travel to the United States, a potentially divisive, inflammatory, xenophobic remark. He dominated the evening with preposterous claims and a larger-than-life performance. This day, like so many others in recent history, was a depressing day for American democracy. Unfortunately, these debates have progressively gotten worse. Civility is on the decline and debates now serve as a stage to discuss candidate reproductive organ sizes.

The Republicans are not the only candidates espousing divisive values. In October of 2015, Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked that she was proud to have made an enemy of the Republican party, placing them in the same category as the Iranians.⁶⁴ Now, the question to which she responded was pointed and strange, however it is truly unfortunate that Clinton felt it politically advantageous to villainize her opponents. Her Democratic challenger suffered from similar problems. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders continually blamed the

billionaire class for all of the country's woes. It is clear that the political system is truly divided. In recent years, independent voters have risen in the United States to 39 percent.⁶⁵ If only the country could find a way to climb out of this partisan divide.

For those tuning in to CNN on December 15, a political ad came on the television set that echoed rhetoric of hope and American values. Incumbent President Francis Underwood appeared on the screen to announce that it was, "a new day in America." He gave a message of hope and prosperity, focusing on an improved economy and a better future for the country's progeny. Underwood appeared to deliver a message that many Americans could get behind and believe in. However, Frank Underwood only exists in fiction. He is also a morally bankrupt, manipulative murderer. Those familiar with the Netflix original series *House of Cards* (2013-2016) know that Frank Underwood is a schemer, but that his scheming yields impressive results. When the reality of the 2016 Presidential election looks so bleak that a deceptive fictional character looks like the more viable option, we ought to question the messages taking place in contemporary politics.

This situation that blends political reality and political fiction into one mediated experience is indicative of how television helps to deflect, reflect, and select images to aid in the process of understanding political affairs. In this chapter, I argue that Netflix's *House of Cards* imagines a presidency of Machiavellian proportions. The program's music, cinematography, and set design exude the premise that, "it is better to be feared than loved."⁶⁶ After briefly reviewing the literature on Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* as well as fictional representations of the presidency, I will define Machiavellian ethics. Next, I examine the textual elements of the program, focusing specifically on the mise-en-scene, cinematography, musical score, and the characterization of Frank Underwood. I conclude that *House of Cards* employs aesthetics of complicity, where the mise-en-scene, cinematography, and music all conspire together to

promote United States politics as a system that privileges political prowess over morality. I contend that this imagined political space comments on current political machinations and offers insight as to how this can change for the better. I will first situate this chapter in the literature of rhetorical criticism and literature, beginning with a brief overview of fictional presidencies as political discourse.

Fictional Presidents and Machiavellianism

In their germinal work which assesses the television series *The West Wing*, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles coined the term presidentiality.⁶⁷ They define presidentiality as an ideological rhetoric that helps shape and order the cultural meaning of the institution of the presidency.⁶⁸ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles argue that rhetorics of militarism, whiteness, and masculinity contribute to our understanding of the presidentiality. Scholars such as Justin S. Vaughn and Stacy Michealson uncover similar conclusions, stressing that masculinity recurs as a lynchpin for presidential characters.⁶⁹ Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson highlight that fictional women presidents are encumbered by this masculinist precept of presidentiality. Fictional programs help to shape the meaning of this term, and with the growth of narrative political fiction, *House of Cards* is an excellent text for analysis. However, whereas Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles found that *The West Wing* was mimetic, mirroring the real-world U.S. presidency, I find *House of Cards* to be Machiavellian, inhabiting a fictional, dystopic world view that portrays the presidency as a princely domicile, allowing citizens to view the unseemly, imagined happenings of U.S. politics. Trevor Parry-Giles has continued this type of scholarship with other fictional worlds. He asserts that the FOX series *24* offers a differing world view of the presidency that is powerfully antidemocratic, asking audiences to question presidential systems and engage in the democratic process.⁷⁰ My analysis yields a similar

conclusion about Frank Underwood, a princely president who lets a citizen in on the “secret” about how politics works. Such a text propagates discourse, blaming the presidency and the federal government for all of the country’s woes. As influential as these scholars are to this body of research, one must consider that much of the analysis relies on criticism of the dialogue itself. My analysis extends their studies by analyzing non-dialogic elements, making the case that mise-en-scene, cinematography, and music all contribute to a Machiavellian reading of the text.

Rhetorical scholar Robert Hariman discusses how modern “Machiavellianism” is inherently prudent and reduces prudence to “calculations of power.”⁷¹ In *Political Style: The Artistry of Power*, Hariman suggests that, “the appeal of Machiavelli’s text comes from its masterful articulation of a characteristically modern political style that crafts an aesthetically unified world of sheer power and calculation.”⁷² He discusses openly that his reading of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* goes across the grain “of both ordinary and erudite understanding of his [Machiavelli’s] work.” He states that the common view of *The Prince* “provides an objective account of the universal conditions of political life, which is an amoral, winner-take-all competition for power.”⁷³ Both Hariman and Maurice Charland emphasize that a Machiavellian political style has a certain amount of utility in a postmodern society.⁷⁴ While that may be the case, Hariman’s reading of Machiavelli divests political action from ethics. I argue that when talking about political discourse, ethics should be given full consideration. In addition to the bifurcation of politics and ethics, Hariman is using Machiavelli to describe a modernist political style, while this project is utilizing Machiavelli to critique a popular culture text.

Randall Bush further complicates Hariman’s reading by asserting that it relies on a narrow reading of *The Prince*.⁷⁵ He echoes the thoughts and scholarship of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that Machiavelli and *The Prince* live in the realm of political ambiguity. The

Prince continually challenges readers with questions—not answers—about the stability of prudential modes of reasoning.”⁷⁶ He discusses that a contemporary reading of *The Prince* marks an end of one political epoch and the beginning of another, as it “continually defies the prudential frame in which it is positioned.”⁷⁷ I believe it best to read *The Prince* imprudently, as it points out the ethical ambiguities of politics, and marks a shift in political ages. *House of Cards*, as a Machiavellian text, allows for a reading that elaborates the relationship between “princes and peoples.”⁷⁸ Instead of reading *The Prince* as a strategic political thinking, I instead follow a more traditional, popular understanding of Machiavelli, where ethics are absent, creating a duplicitous rendering of political culture.

My analysis will focus on how Niccolo Machiavelli and his work are synonymous with deception, manipulation and exploitation.⁷⁹ Margaret Scott discusses the length and breadth of Machiavelli’s most prescient work, *The Prince*. Scott contends that the political realm of Machiavelli includes establishing settlements, levying taxes, manipulating those in political power, managing wars, enforcing laws, and regulation of the prince’s public image.⁸⁰ For the purposes of this project, I will focus on the Machiavellian notions of public image and deceit as they surface through the operational aesthetics of *House of Cards*. Manipulation and deceit are necessary in a popular understanding of a Machiavellian sensibility. Jacob Soll recounts that although *The Prince* was popularly regarded in 1532, “by the mid-sixteenth century an anti-Machiavellian movement began taking shape.”⁸¹ In 1559 the Church banned the book and placed it on prohibited book list.⁸² Since that time, the name Machiavelli has had unseemly connotations. Since this is a criticism of a popular culture text, it is rhetorically expedient to criticize the work in a popular understanding of the original work. For the sake of this project, I use Margaret Scott’s definition of the Machiavel which is a “godless . . . total egocentric. He is

rarely prepared to repose much trust in others, whom he commonly regards as fools or knaves . . . and serves no other cause but his own.”⁸³ This literary definition is appropriate for criticizing a fictional text.

In short, rhetorical scholars Hariman and Charland both agree that Machiavelli can be read in a prudent, realist manner, which helps aid in the creation of a political style. However, this reading limits the importance of ethics in political culture, and must be taken into account when criticizing a media text, as it places citizens in a liminal subject position. Utilizing a common literary understanding of Machiavellian public image and deceit illuminates the citizen’s role within popular culture texts, and concludes that *House of Cards* may have deleterious messages for United States citizens. I now discuss the text itself, focusing on the mise-en-scene, cinematography, and musical scoring.

House of Cards, Mise-en-Scene, and the Public Image

Like numerous popular programs, *House of Cards* employs several characteristics of what Jason Mittell describes as complex television.⁸⁴ The program is a serial narrative in which viewers are expected to watch each episode in order as story arcs span over the course of the season. Like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *House of Cards* employs “novel-like” storytelling, which in turn promotes its cultural cachet.⁸⁵ In addition to its literary connection, *House of Cards* also benefits from having acclaimed actors, directors, and producers. The program stars Academy Award-winning Kevin Spacey as Frank Underwood, and David Fincher is credited with directing many of the program’s episodes. Robin Wright plays Frank’s steely spouse, Claire Underwood. With these two highly acclaimed actors and critically acclaimed writer and showrunner Beau Willimon, *House of Cards* asserts itself as a quality television program. I have selected fragments of the program that remain consistent

throughout the program, including the set design, cinematography and musical scoring. These aspects frame the program as a whole, and therefore aid in the meaning-making of the series as a whole.

The set design for *House of Cards* is particularly important, as it promotes lavish indulgence, as well as ominous darkness, indicative of a Machiavellian sensibility. This Machiavellian sensibility privileges the actions of Frank as prince, and subjects the audience members to complicit subjects. The set design is achieved subtly and elegantly, and calls attention to the viewers' odd relationship with the characters in the program as well as the legislators they represent. Much of the action occurs in office spaces, the U.S. Capitol Building, and Frank Underwood's home. Throughout the program, Frank's office shifts from Capitol Hill to the Oval Office, both reflecting the power he has over his colleagues and foes. Places of power were particularly important when Machiavelli was writing *The Prince*. Machiavelli was working at time of great political and economic change. Before the Renaissance, residences were often shared with many other families.⁸⁶ This would change in the fifteenth century, when people began to rent houses and build their own domiciles. Richard A. Goldthwaite proclaims that a Renaissance palace in Florence was a symbol of power, status, and physical isolation from all other citizens.⁸⁷ Indeed, this sentiment is echoed in Machiavelli's own words: when he proclaims that "man shall not be deterred from beautifying his possessions from the apprehension that they may be taken from him, or that others refrain from opening a trade through fear of taxes; and he should provide rewards for those who desire so to employ themselves, and for all who are disposed in any way to add to the greatness of his City or State."⁸⁸ In other words, it is right to display political power through physical objects. Politicians can and should enjoy material wealth.

To further this reading, it is necessary to consider the television audience as subjects peering into the world of a Francis Underwood, a prince who continues to rise to power. The *mise-en-scene* is a lavish display of power and position. To a person without Washington connections, these spaces only exist in the realm of popular culture. Only the most powerful people in the country have access to these high offices. This setting gives the viewer an affordance, a glimpse into the world of the rich and powerful. While Frank fulfills the duties as Majority Whip, his office is lavish and orderly, reflecting his status as a wealthy prince. Frank grew up in poverty and fought his way to the top, fulfilling the mythic criterion of the American Dream, and the rise of the citizen prince. As Machiavelli writes, the prince should display liberality.⁸⁹ While Frank often recounts to his audience that he does not care much for monetary gain, his office dictates otherwise. A rich, wooden desk sits in the middle of a large white room. A large, silver iMac is overtly positioned on his desk, a symbol of the finest computer technology available. Brass frames adorn the portraits that festoon the walls around his desk. The chairs in the room are of the same quality of his desk, carefully coordinated, further illustrating the wealth that his position brings. There is no mismatched furniture here. A navy, striped couch is placed on one side of the room while a formal, silver coffee set is displayed atop a grand coffee table. Nothing is out of place. There are no piles of drafted legislation. After watching Frank throughout the series, we know that he does not clean his own office. He has reached the pinnacle of success. Even though his machinations are truly underhanded, his inhabited spaces are desirable.

Although the *mise-en-scene* ultimately promotes a princely lifestyle, it is also inflected with great darkness, advancing the text as Machiavellian. Machiavelli as political thinker has been traditionally known as a child of darkness. Neibuhr argues how Machiavelli exposes reality,

“showing that realism lacking a moral dimension is toxic and corrupting.”⁹⁰ He continues to assert this claim, discussing how Machiavelli is first in a long line of moral cynics, darkening democratic political thought.⁹¹ Psychologists discuss Machiavellianism as a personality trait, often portraying it as part of the Dark Triad of Personality, linking it to narcissism, and psychopathy.⁹² The literal darkness of the rooms in the program shadows the program’s morally ambiguous political philosophy.



Figure 1: Frank's office is spacious, offering the viewer the ability to view life as a prince.

Cinematography

One of Machiavelli’s most famous declamations about pragmatism is best displayed through the program’s cinematography. Machiavelli discusses at length how it is “every prince’s desire to be deemed merciful.”⁹³ However if the desire to appear merciful obstructs the prince from maintaining order, it is best to do what is necessary. Machiavelli discusses the benefits of committing crimes in order to establish order. In *The Prince*, he theorizes that the prince use, “cruelties” in order to pass on the benefit to the prince and his subjects.⁹⁴ Ultimately Machiavelli

endorses cruelty if it benefits the state. The opening scene in “Chapter One” is indicative of how the cinematography used throughout the series contributes to this sensibility.⁹⁵ The first frame is completely black, and we, as listeners hear a car screeching followed by the whimpering of a dog. Frank Underwood, dressed in formal wear, emerges from a dimly lit town home. He finds a wounded dog in the street. He speaks intimately to the viewer about pain as he crouches toward the dog and recounts, “There are two kinds of pain. Good pain - the sort of pain that motivates, that makes you strong. Then there’s bad pain – useless pain, the sort of pain that’s only suffering. I welcome the former. I have no patience for the latter.”⁹⁶ Then, without wavering, (and outside of the frame) Frank puts his hand around the dog’s neck and strangles it to death, thus showing the viewer that the dog’s pain is useless suffering – it has no value. He continues, “Moments like this require someone like me. Someone who will act. Who will do what no one else has the courage to do. The unpleasant thing. The necessary thing. There. No more pain.”⁹⁷ The way in which the camera focuses on Frank’s face and keeps his actions out of frame indicates aspects of Frank’s personality and character. In a scene that only lasts a minute or so, we come to learn about Frank’s philosophy, his strength and power, and perhaps most disturbingly, his ability to get things done. Such a display resonates with Machiavelli’s concession that a prince can and should commit crimes, if it provides stability. Frank knew that the dog was going to be in an unstable condition for the indefinite future. Frank has no use for the liminal spaces of suffering and pain and acted quickly to nullify this threat.

What is striking about this opening scene is how the camera is positioned, signaling the audience to view the cruelty of his actions firsthand, and are manipulated into interacting with Machiavelli’s moral predisposition. Frank’s face is shrouded in darkness, and the camera uses a shallow focus to augment Frank’s narrative importance. The camera never pans or tilts to view

the injured dog. As Frank's face and arms tighten, the dog whimpers and howls in agony, but the viewer is asked to deliver the final blow. Because the dog is never seen within the frame, viewers must make the inference that Frank actually ends the dog's life. It acts as an audiovisual enthymeme, a polysemic possibility. Frank eliminates pain – the major premise, a message the audience has gleaned from his words and actions. The dog is in pain – a minor premise illustrated by the plaintive whimpers occurring off screen. The conclusion then is that Frank will eliminate the dog that is in pain. However, manipulation is key in a world dictated by Machiavellian ethics. Unwittingly, the audience has elected to operate in a moral universe where the end result benefits the situation. Order has been restored.



Figure 2: Viewers essentially aid in the death of the dog. All of the action occurs out of frame, manipulating the viewer to make the inferential leap.

Cinematographer Igor Martinovic keeps characters at a distance with purposefully manipulated medium shots to keep characters at a distance, further emphasizing the politician's distance to the viewer. The characters are cold and inhumane, and the shot distance reflects those personality traits. An example of this is illustrated in the figure below.



Figure 3: Frank Underwood stares at the camera from a safe distance.

In “Chapter Two” of Episode One, an index finger heavily laden with barbecue sauce, a passing substitute for blood, figuratively slashes the throat of President Garrett Walker pictured in a newspaper article. Frank is heard commenting that what he likes about people is that “they stack so well.” The camera does not pan or focus, it merely gazes on the face of Congressman Underwood and Frank’s unspoken wish to do away with Walker, further illustrating Frank’s resolute, unwavering personality. Both the camera’s movement (or lack thereof) and his opening monologue implies for an attentive audience member that Frank has prior experience with bodies, where they are hidden, where they are buried, and that they are numerous. Frank speaks the words with early morning sunshine illuminating his face and yet his words belie the hopefulness of the new dawn and instead conjure up an image of death, something to be both feared and worshipped since history began. This of course adds to the Machiavellian aesthetic, pitting fear and love in a complicated duality. The camera employs a safe distance from Frank. The viewers adopt a liminal space, standing between the threshold of intimacy and distance. The

viewers are close enough to interact with Frank, but far enough away to remain out of harm's way.



Figure 4: The camera focuses on Frank from a safe position, as he ravenously eats his ribs, calculating his next attack.

Scoring

The program's musical theme rhetorically communicates both patriotism and a Machiavellian aesthetic, fusing the theme of the show as both sinister and oddly nationalistic. The theme begins with a synthesizer playing an arpeggiated, chromatic chord in the bass clef.⁹⁸ The notes are played in a minor key, which adds a sinister flavor, and as the chord is repeated several times over, it begins to resemble a familiar tune, "Entrance of the Gladiators." This well-known theme, often used as a circus screamer in the early part of the twentieth century, was used to excite a crowd for upcoming entertainment.⁹⁹ This bass chord continues through the piece ostinato, giving foundation to the composition overall.¹⁰⁰ This simple foundational chord functions rhetorically, encouraging the audience to consider Frank Underwood as a performer, a ringmaster of sorts, but instead of the light, airy calliope, or fanciful brass sections playing this chord, a soft synthesized piano continues throughout the piece. Frank is indeed a ringmaster,

placing himself in the middle of the action, but he does not do this through grand declamations. Like Machiavelli's prince, Frank prefers to practice his craft just behind closed doors, with the help of a trusted committee of councilors.¹⁰¹ Underwood is out of sight from the everyday citizens he ostensibly represents.

Snare drums quickly join the synthesizer, with powerful staccato pulsations, reminding the listener of military marches.¹⁰² The snare drums give a few quick paradiddles, and then are joined by the piercing reverberations of the trumpet.¹⁰³ These instruments, the trumpet and snare drum, paired together continue to resemble the instrumentation of a military band. Military bands are prevalent in many western cultures, and are often used to catalyze and breed social patriotism.¹⁰⁴ The trumpet's melody imitates familiar bugle calls, short tunes used to signal military events. Bugle calls were first used to communicate clearly through the confusion of the battlefield. The military overtones of the theme song can be heard clearly, and plays triumphantly over the synthesizer's melancholy chords. It is important also to note that while the arpeggiated chord plays in A minor key, the trumpet is playing in A major, giving a bit of discord between the two phrases.¹⁰⁵ Such discord asks the listener to consider their positionality to notions of U. S. nationalism. While the trumpet performs a triumphant martial theme in A major, the synthesizer continues on its path in A minor. The martial theme is tainted with the sinister intonations of the synthesizer, giving off an aura of foreboding. Listeners question the motives of their politicians. Beneath the brassy speeches and the grandstanding, lives the world of lies and scandal.

Amidst the clash between the melancholic bass line and the triumphant trumpet, another keyboard plays a louder, arpeggiated chord known as the puppet master theme.¹⁰⁶ This chord uses a chromatic scale and occurs throughout the sequence. The composer's allusion to puppetry

invites the viewer to consider Frank Underwood as puppetmaster, the prince. Frank, behind the scenes, pulls all the strings. He is the one in charge of the machinations that take place. His underlings are merely props used to convey a point. Such musical decisions add to the listener's understanding of Frank possessing a Machiavellian perspective. He stands in the shadows and influences others for his own self-gain and stability of his principality. Not only is this reflected in the character and dialogue of Frank Underwood, but it resonates throughout this musical score as well.

The score is non-diegetic, which again allows the audience a privileged position and occurs while a camera tracks Washington, D.C., and ruminates on landmarks while the sun travels across the sky. House of Cards is devoid of blue skies and sunshine, as the opening credits will attest. Blue skies are continuously threatened and deposed by incoming clouds of darkness. Shadows emerge and change the features of the landscape and landmarks, sometimes growing in size and becoming more ominous. Clearly recognizable landmarks like the World War II memorial are rendered incomprehensible as the sun falls behind the horizon.



Figure 5: The day passes by, and obscures the clarity of Washington.



Figure 6: The Capitol is enveloped in shadow as the theme plays through.

The viewer has opportunity to see the Capitol in this fashion. A darker perspective challenges the beauty of the historic landmarks. This environment is not the same Washington inhabited by other fictional presidents. This illustration is much more complex, weaving both beauty and inelegance. Such images and aural elements complicate the relationship between American ideals and the darker narratives of U.S. politics.

However, this program, dark as it is, contrasts with current political rhetoric, as seen through presidential politics. In the following section, I discuss contemporary campaign rhetoric, and how it attempts to distance itself from princely presidentiality. Campaign rhetoric that portends to be “anti-elitist” might have serious consequences for the U.S. electorate. It is important to consider that *House of Cards* does not exist in a vacuum. This program is dialoging with real, contemporary United States politics. Consider the introductions, where the fictional campaign of Frank Underwood colluded and collided with images of the Republican primary race. Now that I have discussed how *House of Cards* promotes a Machiavellian political sensibility, I discuss its implications in the field of Communication Studies and U.S. political culture, broadly.

Television is a fickle industry, and political television shows might not always be in vogue. Someday, *House of Cards* will be cancelled. Showrunner Beau Willimon has already

stepped down from the project, and no doubt the actors and producers will gravitate towards other projects, and it will no longer be the popular “new” program on the Netflix streaming site. But this program doesn’t exist on the air, and will likely live on as long as Netflix is viable. If Netflix exists ten years from now, *House of Cards* has the potential to live on in the digital media sphere, continuing to inform audience understandings of the U.S. presidency. The fact that *House of Cards* operates within this aesthetic selects a United States reality for citizens to consider and reject. In an interview with ABC News, Trevor Parry-Giles discusses the importance of this text as it depicts a president that accomplishes goals. The world of Frank Underwood is a world without ethics or morals, but throughout the program, Frank is able to pass legislation and keep America working. Parry-Giles remarks, “The conventional wisdom about people like Frank Underwood is that he gets things done, that’s in response to a perception of the government as ineffective and unable to get things done.”¹⁰⁷

Although Frank in *House of Cards* may exhibit the characteristics of the princely elite, 2016 presidential candidates have attempted to distance themselves from that political sensibility. Senator Bernie Sanders and businessman Donald Trump have seen unprecedented success running “populist,” anti-elitist campaigns.¹⁰⁸ Micheal Kazin explains that historically, the word populist referred to a group of people championing the interests of the farmers and working class, and asked to break up trusts and give strength to labor unions.¹⁰⁹ Kazin continues that Trump and Sanders, the “populists” of the day, blame the elites for the nation’s problems.¹¹⁰ Bernie Sanders seeks to right the economic wrongs of a ruling billionaire class. Now, these arguments should be weighed carefully. Bernie Sanders has been a part of the political establishment for over thirty years. However, Sanders’s tenure in politics reflects his democratic socialist tendencies, and has been a vocal opponent to Wall Street for years. Conversely, Donald

Trump's populist sensibilities attack women, immigrants, and minorities who are stealing jobs that Trump intimates belong to white, working class Americans. Attacking minorities and blaming them for the nation's downfall can only come from a figure that is not a minority. His declamations can only come from a privileged, princely position. Donald Trump owns a large majority of properties, buildings and golf courses, signaling his advantaged position within the United States economy. Both Trump and Sanders are distancing themselves from political elitism. Regardless of the facts, both candidates are extremely popular among their supporters, and challenge the political "establishments" of both the Republican and Democratic parties. The troubling aspect is the fact that Trump gets to make statements against this establishment while scapegoating others for the nation's problems. Only princes are allowed to speak with such freedom.

House of Cards plays into the suspicion that political elites serve their own interests. This is particularly significant now due to the new ways citizens take in political information. As I discussed in a previous chapter, Jeffrey Jones asks for scholars to account for the political use of different media texts including fictional genres. We, as political communication scholars, assume "that news is the primary and proper sphere of political communication; that the most important function of media is to supply citizens with information; and that political engagement must necessarily be associated with physical activity."¹¹¹ Jones instead argues that scholars assess the variety of media that citizens utilize in their daily experience.¹¹² *House of Cards* is one such avenue for citizens to engage with. As political elitism becomes a bitter epithet in electoral politics, we must concede that *House of Cards* is grappling with this issue and presenting the worst fears that politicians care only about themselves and insulate their power through manipulation and deceit. Frank is a manipulator and a fabricator, and the audience is

allowed to see how he goes about making deals and getting things done. What occurs in the program diverges from the campaign rhetoric, signaling that regardless of reality, wariness of the political establishment is a very real thing. Hillary Clinton, who was the only “viable” candidate for the Democratic Party has had to reshape her campaign message to fit a more populist message.¹¹³ Governor Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio failed to distance themselves from their establishment roots.¹¹⁴ *House of Cards* acts as a fictional depiction of political machinery that voters have been railing against this entire election season. The American people want to see a political change, as evidenced by the primary election season.

The troubling part here, however, is that if voters always took an interest in the political process, and they truly wanted to expunge elitism from Capitol Hill, they would vote them all from office. The myth of the political elite places people in a subjugated, powerless position, which is simply not true. Voters have a huge amount of power when it comes to electing officials. Voters could decide to vote against incumbents and lobby to change the election process. In a twenty-first century political environment, collectively taking responsibility for our civic lives continues to be complex and harrowing. John Bernard asserts that Machiavelli’s words ask us to consider those things that limit our ability to engage in a civic society. The narrative elements of *House of Cards* collude to implicate the viewer as bystander or accomplice to the action that takes place in the series. The set design is particularly important, as it promotes lavish indulgence as well as ominous darkness displaying the diegetic world of the political elite. Frank shifts power throughout the program, and his office reflects his power and prestige. In addition to the set design, the cinematography forces the viewer to make inferences, furthering their complicity with Frank’s actions, and the camera allows the viewer to watch the actions on screen from a safe distance. Finally the *House of Cards* musical theme rhetorically

communicates both patriotism and a Machiavellian ethic, fusing the theme of the show as both sinister and oddly nationalistic. Viewers are able to digest Washington D.C. by listening to the theme, and infuse the viewers' understandings of Frank and his machinations. It is up to the viewer to accept their own complicity in the creation of the princely elite. Only citizens have the ability to reverse and change the order of things.

It is evident that *House of Cards* does not promote democracy or democratic governance. My findings are parallel with that of Trevor Parry-Giles, when he analyzed *24* (2004-2010, 2014). Like *24*, *House of Cards* “articulates a pronounced presidentialism wherein power and authority for governmental and political action are vested almost entirely with the nation’s chief executive.”¹¹⁵ *House of Cards* is Machiavellian and projects an antidemocratic sensibility that promotes a system of underhanded actions to accomplish political goals. The program does not offer audiences an alternative to this princely presidentiality. This duplicitous sensibility does not offer communitarian forms of governance, nor does it significantly change the rhetorical conception of presidentiality. The mise-en-scene, cinematography, and scoring suggest that Frank Underwood neatly falls into the category of presidentiality – white, male, and militaristic. Because *House of Cards* offers a Machiavellian worldview, it fails in promoting a democratic culture where citizens have power to make decisions. Instead, viewers watch a typical (yet deeply sinister) president make decisions by himself, for himself.

CHAPTER THREE: LAUGHING WITH LESLIE: INCONGROUS HUMOR AND THE FEMALE GAZE IN *PARKS AND RECREATION*

The setting is a local auditorium, filled with concerned citizens waiting to hear the closing words of two candidates running for city council. One candidate has a clear advantage: he is wealthy, well connected, and employs most of the citizens of this small Midwestern town. The other candidate is a mid-level government bureaucrat, fighting for justice and equality for the people of the town. She knows she is behind in the polls and offers her closing remarks. She states that if she pushes too strongly, it is because she does not feel that things are “moving fast enough.”¹¹⁶ She cares for the people of the town, and argues that her opponent does not want what is best for them. She remarks, “If I seem too passionate, it’s because I care. If I come on strong, it’s because I feel strongly.”¹¹⁷ Her opponent struck by her words states, “Holy shit Leslie, that was awesome.”¹¹⁸ She ends up winning the city council race. Her fight for justice and equality wins out over the privileged man who should have easily won.

Leslie Knope is the fictional protagonist of NBC’s *Parks and Recreation*, a satirical sitcom set in rural Indiana. For the majority of the series’ run (2009-2015), Leslie works as the Deputy Director for the Parks Department in fictional Pawnee, Indiana. She works tirelessly to improve her local community, organizes citizens, and loves her friends and family. She is flawed too, often planning too much and meddling in her friends’ affairs. She is a lovable series protagonist, who at first glance seems rather innocuous. But Leslie’s spirited attitude and mentality prove to faithful audiences that she has strong political convictions, and often clashes with her anti-government, Libertarian boss, Ron Swanson. Her government office is festooned with American flags, and portraits of powerful, progressive female politicians including Janet

Reno, Madeline Albright, Nancy Pelosi, and Hillary Clinton. Leslie embodies a feminist sensibility and is endowed with the determination to make a difference in her community.

In this chapter, I argue that *Parks and Recreation* makes arguments for a feminist political culture. After first defining feminism and postfeminism, I briefly review literature on the representation of feminism and comedy in popular media; I examine the importance of female representation on television. Next, I examine critically significant episodes of *Parks and Recreation* and display how feminist arguments are at work in the program. I conclude that *Parks and Recreation* exhibits feminist qualities and contributes to a more progressive political culture.

***Parks and Recreation* and Feminist Television Criticism**

NBC debuted *Parks and Recreation* on April 9, 2009. Created by *The Office* showrunners Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, the program prominently features the operations of the small-town parks department of fictional Pawnee, Indiana in a mockumentary style. The protagonist is Leslie Knope, the deputy director of the parks department. Other central characters include parks director Ron Swanson, office workers Donna Meagle and Jerry (a.k.a. Gary or Larry) Gergich; parks department intern, April Ludgate; and concerned Pawnee citizens, Anne Perkins and Andy Dwyer. The action occurs in the Parks and Recreation office of Pawnee City Hall. Although not an extremely popular program, *Parks and Recreation* generated much critical acclaim and garnered numerous awards, including the Peabody Award in 2012. In 2014, Amy Poehler earned a Golden Globe for her portrayal of Leslie Knope.¹¹⁹

Much of critical and scholarly analysis stems from *Parks and Recreation*'s portrayal of a healthy democracy. NPR host and columnist, Linda Holmes, states that *Parks and Recreation* "has been committed from the start to the idea that people with very different politics can love

each other, and that humanity is a kind of universal solvent that doesn't undo disagreements but can clean off enough other stuff for surprising connections to happen.”¹²⁰ Media studies scholar Heather Hendershot suggests that *Parks and Recreation* exhibits values of a cultural forum, where characters work through difficult decisions together in order to improve their community. Hendershot asserts, “liberals and conservatives can work together within local government – perhaps even sharing a plate of waffles – in order to make the world a better place.”¹²¹ Thomas West contends that although this pro-democracy, populist sensibility might be conflicted, the overarching spirit of *Parks and Recreation* gives viewers hope for a more just society in the future.¹²²

As a rhetorical critic studying television, I am concerned with “the purposes, strategies and functions that can be discerned from an understanding of the text and its potential interaction with audiences.”¹²³ For my analysis, I identify ways *Parks and Recreation* operates as a feminist text utilizing the notions of incongruous feminist humor and the female gaze. I randomly selected scenes from the pilot episode and two episodes from the second season. Each episode exhibits opportunities for feminist readings. Through humor by incongruity and the female gaze, *Parks and Recreation* contributes to an ongoing feminist project that reflects and shapes American political discourse in ways crucial to the successful execution of deliberative democracy, which in turn offers a comic corrective from *House of Cards*'s morally ambiguous, political universe.

Historically, progressive media images of women in politics are rare in U.S. popular culture. Scholars have assessed the ways in which women are exploited in contemporary media. Karrin Vasby Anderson argues that political culture and campaign journalism during the 2008 election was pornified, signaling a backlash against the political gains of women.¹²⁴ An increase

in female representation and importance in fictional television however, has generated a conversation about how feminist principles are emerging in popular mainstream media. In both popular and scholarly studies, Liz Lemon, protagonist of NBC's critically acclaimed *30 Rock* (2006-2013), for example, is often lauded as an example for modern feminism in popular culture.¹²⁵ Liz is the head writer of *The Girlie Show* on NBC, constantly fights the good fight against stereotypes, and does not concern herself with maintaining a "ladylike" image.¹²⁶ And in the world of television, Liz does not stand alone. Strong female leads are beginning to break the mold of the submissive woman. Along with *30 Rock*, *House of Cards* (2013-2016), *Parade's End* (2012-2012), *Girls* (2012-2016), *The Good Wife* (2009-2016), *Enlightened* (2011-2013), *Homeland* (2011-2013), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2016), *Parks and Recreation* provides complex female characters and nuanced depictions of gender. Leslie Knope stands as an exemplar of a woman working as a government employee, signaling a representational relationship between both gender and politics.

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Popular Culture

In order to situate myself as a feminist critic, it is necessary to first define feminism and postfeminism. Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson concede that defining feminism is a "tricky and potentially dangerous task" because of the many different people that define themselves as feminist.¹²⁷ I agree that defining feminism is difficult, as it confines a multiplicity of philosophies that feminism can support. I echo Sheeler and Anderson's definition of feminism as it relates to "equality and gender justice."¹²⁸ Not only does feminism work to create equality, but also exposes texts, legislation, and societal norms that subjugates others based on sexual difference. Feminism seeks for genders, sexes, and sexualities to hold equal value in cultural, religious, social, and economic systems. When I argue that *Parks and*

Recreation forwards a feminist political sensibility, I am asserting that this television show offers opportunities to imagine an electorate that seeks to expose and correct the patriarchy, and dialogues with feminist philosophies of gender equality. But before a feminist critique can take place, I must first address how feminism is portrayed on narrative television.

Communication and media scholars have documented the relationship between popular culture and feminism. Communication scholar Bonnie J. Dow discusses that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) is a significant and important text that served as an outline for what could be considered as feminism on television.¹²⁹ In the 1970s, many television programs were conversant with the social change occurring at the time. Dow discusses that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* “increased the visibility of feminist activism in the early 1970s.”¹³⁰ Portraying a working woman and living alone in a big city away from family was easily read as a progressive stance in the 1970s. While it was successful in promoting a “face” of feminism, it sadly reinforced a specific depiction of women that reinforced some of the exclusionary tenets of second wave feminism.¹³¹ Specifically, characterizations of young, white, heterosexual women found in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* created specific parameters for how feminism would be framed, which would include characterizations of women as single workers who had little time to critique patriarchal values.¹³² Representations of women have often become more troubling as conservatism indelibly made its way into the zeitgeist of the late twentieth century. Instead of presenting feminism as a necessary framework for equality, popular culture frames feminism as concluded; an ideology that has achieved all it set out to do and everyone lives as an equal partner in democracy.

Postfeminism, another tricky concept, discusses the individualization of feminist politics. Belinda A. Stillion Southard states that postfeminism is “the depoliticization of second-wave

feminist politics, often consumed by young women.”¹³³ In other words, postfeminism holds that the work of feminism is done and any and all struggles that encumber women are a result of the personal choices they make for themselves. Instead of viewing chauvinism and patriarchy as systemic issues that disallow women from making acceptable choices, postfeminism asserts that women, as individuals, can decide to do whatever they desire. According to Dow, postfeminist media “posits that feminism is over, has done its work, and media accounts often assume that opportunity for women has exploded, thus confirming the belief that feminism has triumphed, at least in the public sphere.”¹³⁴ It is a troubling worldview that undermines the work that feminists have done and continue to do.

A postfeminist sensibility assumes that feminism has already leveled the playing field.¹³⁵ Contributing to the postfeminist framework is the representation of men in popular culture. Dow argues that on television, postfeminist male partners are very supportive, professional and progressive, so any and all hardships the women encounter must surely be of their own making. Because the men are so supportive of women’s careers and ambitions, the enemy is often not the patriarchy, but other women.¹³⁶ Mary Douglas Vavrus explains that a postfeminist perspective assumes that “women’s material needs have, for the most part, been met and that a politics of feminism is no longer necessary for women’s advancement.”¹³⁷ Many texts have been characterized as quintessentially postfeminist including *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex in the City* (1998-2004). For those with feminist sensibilities, the media landscape tends to be a dismal one, rife with stereotypes, traditional gender roles, and postfeminist individualism. In that environment, *Parks and Recreation* stands out as an exemplar of feminist values in a postfeminist media milieu. I argue that *Parks and Recreation* departs from a postfeminist

sensibility, and instead posits a feminist sensibility that exposes a patriarchal system in a comedic fashion.

Televisual portrayals of young, white, successful heterosexual women can be troubling, because they often reinforce cultural norms, patriarchal values, and unrealistic ideals. Scholarly attention to these genres ultimately reaches a similar conclusion: Examples of this critical assessment are voluminous, and make up a large portion of feminist media critique.¹³⁸ However, the fact that mediated texts are problematic does not stop people from watching television and participating in popular culture. As media critics, it is our duty to mine texts for meaning that illustrates the various messages that media texts hold. Many people generate meaning from, and ascribe value to televisual texts, regardless of how problematic the cultural depictions might be.¹³⁹ Stillion Southard argues, *Sex and the City*, described as a postfeminist text by many scholars, is actually able to play out multiple feminist meanings.¹⁴⁰ Southard cites media scholar John Fiske, asserting that televisual texts have ambiguity, an ambiguity that provides viewers with the ability to reject oppressive meanings. Polysemic readings allow for multiple readings, adding nuance and complexity to the way rhetorical scholars approach and assess mediated texts. Although *Sex and the City* is often discussed as a postfeminist text, Southard argues that the program ultimately challenges postfeminist values of individualism, femininity, and agency.¹⁴¹ Texts can be more than simply postfeminist. They can also hold important messages that argue for feminist ideals. Two ways to look at how texts can challenge postfeminist values is through incongruity humor and the female gaze.

Humor by Incongruity and the Female Gaze

This thesis will bolster the relationship between feminism and the rhetorical strategy of humor. Stacey Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar argue that contemporary feminist movements

employ humor in order to address oppression and discrimination.¹⁴² Gloria Kaufman suggests that feminist humor ridicules “a social system that must be changed.”¹⁴³ Kaufman further contends that feminist humor “reverses mainstream cultural beliefs, values and roles, and ridicules cultural expectations.”¹⁴⁴ Television too, has a history of employing comedy to meet feminist ends. In the 1970s, television programs about feminism and women’s rights were almost always comedies. Dow argues that comedies are usually more liberal, because they are able to undermine social institutions in a benign and discernable fashion.¹⁴⁵ Media studies professors Gray, Jones, and Thompson all assert that satire specifically operates as a source of social critique. They note, “all humor plays with social norms, then all humor carries the potential for reflection on, or even criticism of, those norms.”¹⁴⁶ I want to explore how *Parks and Recreation*, as a satirical text, challenges social norms in regards to feminist principles specifically.

Communication Scholar, John Meyer, conceives that humor functions in three theories: relief theory, incongruity theory, and superiority theory.¹⁴⁷ Relief theory supposes that humor releases tension and stress, and often rhetorically manifests itself through self-disparagement.¹⁴⁸ Incongruity theory holds that people laugh at what is unexpected and surprising. Meyer notes that politicians often utilize incongruous humor rhetorically by portraying their opponents’ actions as irrational.¹⁴⁹ The final theory of humor is superiority, and contends that all humor is made from an inborn desire to feel superior or to control others.¹⁵⁰ Meyer notes that often this type of humor is unpleasant if subjected to the joke.¹⁵¹ Humor thrives on ambiguity, and while one listener might hear a joke and be relieved, another listener might hear the same joke and be surprised by its incongruity. Because incongruity humor has been linked to feminist messages, I will analyze how this humor operates within *Parks and Recreation* to forward a feminist message.

Feminist rhetors often adopt comedy in order to subvert dominant, patriarchal ideology. Dow and Tonn argue that former Texas governor, Ann Richards, utilized humor through the feminine style. In their assessment, the feminine style is “part of a synthesis of form and substance that works to promote an alternative political philosophy.”¹⁵² Dow and Tonn assert that Richards employed humor to critique sex roles. Such humor shielded Richards from being labeled as an “angry feminist.”¹⁵³ In order to understand how feminist humor operates, Diane Martin discusses that Governor Richard’s rhetoric had to negotiate the culture of Texas, a place commonly held to be extremely conservative and masculine.¹⁵⁴ The speeches that Martin analyzes assess multiple functions of humor including relief, incongruity or superiority.¹⁵⁵ This framework of relief, incongruity, and superiority are important to understand how humor operates broadly within a rhetorical sense. *Parks and Recreation* uses incongruity humor most often to subvert and critique dominant ideologies.

Cooper’s explication of the female gaze begins with Mulvey’s classic theory of the male gaze, a concept that argues Hollywood films are merely a vehicle for reflecting and satisfying the male unconscious. The camera movements and narrative structures of films operate to place women in an objectified state. Such films, which pervade the industry, marginalize women and positions heterosexual masculinity to be the dominant position for social and sexual power. Cooper notes that Mulvey’s theory is highly influenced by both Metz and Freud, who do not account for female experience. Therefore, women can resist this reading in favor of an oppositional, female gaze. Cooper pulls from various critics and theorists to conclude a female gaze, “articulates a mockery of machismo. . . and a fissure in the representation of power itself.”¹⁵⁶ *Parks and Recreation* also employs a female gaze to forward a feminist sensibility.

Brenda Cooper defines the female gaze as a way through which women can view media texts in order to derive oppositional pleasure. She posits that *Thelma and Louise* (1991) is an example of the female gaze at work, as it undercuts and subverts dominant male gazes, all too present and pervasive in mainstream Hollywood films.¹⁵⁷ Machismo is undercut to resist male objectification and dominance, commonly found in male-gaze centered texts. Cooper outlines that mockery manifests itself through three filmic elements: stereotypes of lecherous heterosexual men, depictions of men as spectacles for women's attention, and the celebration of women friendships.¹⁵⁸

Cooper's female gaze theory first starts with a mockery of male dominance and sexism through stereotypical characters.¹⁵⁹ Cooper recounts the various characters in the film *Thelma and Louise* and demonstrates how these characters encourage spectators to participate in the ridicule of misogynistic and sexist behavior. Cooper dwells on the overt ugliness of these male characters in *Thelma and Louise*, marking their lecherous attitudes.¹⁶⁰ I will pause here to say that no such overtly sexist characters appear regularly in *Parks and Recreation*. The main male characters of the program are framed humorously in order to depict their patriarchal tendencies. For my analysis, I will focus on Ron Swanson, as a masculine character who contrasts with the messages and ideology of Leslie Knope. The interaction between Leslie and Ron often function to place patriarchy on display and offers ways for the characters to change behavior and move forward with a more inclusive, feminist sensibility.

Cooper's second component of the female gaze is "returning the look" where men are put on display as spectacles for women's attention. She describes how *Thelma and Louise* "refuse the male gaze and instead speak female desire."¹⁶¹ Such moments in Cooper's analysis represent the liberation from passivity and assert women as initiators and actors.¹⁶² Cooper talks about

how this action usually manifests itself in a sexual encounter with a man. Thelma objectifies a man for her own sexual fulfillment. For *Parks and Recreation*, I contend that Leslie Knope takes the male gaze and puts its patriarchal predilections on display, casting her character as an actor for justice and equity. Leslie, in effect “articulates a mockery of machismo,” disrupting male dominance of the narrative.

Cooper’s third strategy is the filmic representation of female friendships, as it articulates a resistance to patriarchy. She argues that for Thelma and Louise, “men are extraneous, not central, to their lives.”¹⁶³ The display of female friendships threatens patriarchal value systems. Cooper continues in her analysis to concede that the relationships are not flawless, but instead, “set aside their disagreements to support each other and maintain connection.”¹⁶⁴ These components to Cooper’s arguments are critical in my analysis as I describe how Leslie’s relationships with her friends are central to the story’s core. I depart from Cooper’s theory that the friendship must be shared between two women to argue for a progressive agenda. *Parks and Recreation* embodies an inclusive friendship that is supportive of the community at large. This communal rapport exhibits feminist values as it promotes an inclusive friendship schema. Indeed, the friendships between Leslie and her friends, both male and female, are a departure from patriarchal systems and envisions friendships as communities in which all parties mutually benefit.

Incongruity Humor in Parks and Recreation

In the first minute of the pilot episode, Leslie asserts her position both as a government worker and as a politician. As Deputy Director of the Parks Department in Pawnee, she is charged with park upkeep and safety. The audience is introduced to Leslie as she interviews a small child playing, but is soon interrupted by another child who announces that a homeless

person is sleeping in a nearby slide. As she rushes to remove the vagrant from the local park, she talks about how exciting it is to be a government worker. As she pushes the man down the slide she says that the “government isn’t just a boys’ club anymore. Women are everywhere. It’s a great time to be a woman in politics. Hillary Clinton. Sarah Palin. Me. Nancy Pelosi... Leslie Knope is stopping for no one.”¹⁶⁵ Her remarks are sharply incongruous with the actions she performs as she narrates the scene. While she lauds the accomplishments of various political women, her governmental actions are pale in comparison to those of the other women on her list. For one, Leslie is a mid-level bureaucrat, not the Secretary of State, governor, or Speaker of the House. Her actions are more quotidian and speak to a far more universal experience. As she references how great it is to be a woman in politics, she uses a broom handle to push a vagrant down a slide. She speaks optimistically on behalf of women in politics, and her determination to see the brighter side is laudable. However, the fact is her job, as a woman in politics, includes cleaning up a recreational area. As she finally gets the man out of the slide, her only audience is a group of small children and parents. The scene signifies that women’s role in politics, though improved, is far from equal. She is the parks worker cleaning up the park. Her boss, Ron Swanson, is nowhere in sight. Juxtaposition between her remarks and her actions signal a humorous incongruity that exposes some of the inequalities women face in the political arena. Leslie’s actions go uncelebrated, except for a few children and parents. Her contribution might have been quite a feat, but certainly it amounts to little in the patriarchal world of politics.

Another instance of feminist humor by incongruity is in the episode, “Woman of the Year” (March 4, 2009). A letter arrives at the Parks Department from the Pawnee Chapter of the Indiana Organization of Women (IOW), a group that celebrates the achievements of women in public service, and is ostensibly feminist. Leslie opens the letter, believing she has won the

“Dorothy Everton Smythe Woman of the Year Award,” named for a trailblazing Pawnee woman “who wore pants to church on a Sunday” (and spent four years in jail for her crime).¹⁶⁶ However, Leslie soon discovers that the award has been given to her boss, Ron Swanson.

Ron, of course, never started any government program of any kind. Ron’s office, festooned with a Claymore landmine, a pistol, and a large portrait of breakfast food, illustrates that his interests lie elsewhere-- visible markers of contrast to Leslie’s celebratory, pro-government office. He usually wears earth tones, mirroring his penchant for outdoor sports, such as hunting and fishing. At first glance Ron exudes what it means to be a “man,” from a very traditional standpoint. Although a lovable and likable character, Ron Swanson exhibits stereotypical masculine attributes. Throughout the series, Ron’s judgment is clouded by his predilection for female companionship. He sometimes loses his faculties when his ex-wives come to pay him visits.¹⁶⁷ His libido sometimes gets in the way of his better judgment, and he often acts selfishly in the name of sexual intercourse. He is an endearing character, but exhibits some stereotypes of overt masculinity.

The fact that Ron received the award over Leslie is incongruous humor functioning enthymematically. The general premise is that a women’s organization will celebrate achievements of women. It is suspected Leslie will be the recipient of the award, but instead, it is given to Ron. This humor points to the fact that men are more highly valued than women, even in the eyes of an organization that supposedly celebrates women’s achievements. This action signifies which voices are heard and preferred over others. Leslie’s hopes to be recognized for her achievements have been stifled, and instead, credit is given to her boss.

This incongruous humor is expounded upon during the course of the episode, with the president of the IOW stating that they made a choice to present the award to a man. In order to

clear up confusion, they ask the IOW to rectify the mistake, but the organization director reveals that they chose a man in order for the media to pay attention to them. She says:

We made a very conscious decision this year to choose a man. Well, uh, every year we give it to a woman, and frankly nobody cares. Yeah, the media has all but written us off as a niche interest group. But if you give a woman's award to a mustachioed, masculine man such as yourself, well, then, eventually people take notice.¹⁶⁸

Men are more highly valued, and the president of a women's organization makes this abundantly clear. In complicity, Leslie and Ron plan to sabotage the awards banquet by delivering a condemnatory speech, outlining the meaninglessness of the award. Ron ends up presenting the award to Leslie, but the newspaper declares Ron the recipient. They throw the plaque into the garbage bin; however, Leslie goes back to recover it. This humorous set of events coincides with scholarship explicating how feminists are discounted in traditional news media.¹⁶⁹ In order to combat how the media looks at feminist organizations, the IOW nominated and gave the award to a man. This goes against an audience expectation, thus reversing our mainstream predispositions, and ridicules our cultural understanding. Institutional patriarchy is exposed in this scene. Women are simply not included in the dominant media voice. As I have discussed, the program utilizes incongruity humor to suggest a feminist political sensibility. This political sensibility is further explicated in a discussion of *Parks and Recreation* exhibiting the female gaze.

The Female Gaze in *Parks and Rec*

The first criteria of Cooper's female gaze theory suggests that texts with a female gaze exaggerate the behaviors of men and contrasts them with well-rounded female characters. An evident example of the male stereotype criteria can be found in the episode, "Woman of the Year." Ron Swanson, the director of the Parks and Recreation Department, recognizes that the "Dorothy Everton Smyth Award" goes to Leslie, and is not meant for him. However, he teases

her at great length about the mistake. Ron goes to the trouble of hiring a professional photographer to take his official award portrait. He asks Leslie, “What represents a woman more: this pot or Deputy Director Barbie?”¹⁷⁰ His actions upset Leslie, but Ron concedes that she, in fact, deserves the award. Because she is the title character, the audience is primed to agree with Leslie’s sensibilities.

Ron gestures toward notions of female domesticity (the kitchen pot), and overt sexual objectification (the Barbie doll), which playfully casts him as overtly masculine. Cooper theorizes that through a female gaze, male characters are exaggerated, perverse, and overly masculine, and that creates an incongruity.¹⁷¹ Male characters exaggerate sexism and misogyny to the point where its inanity is on full display. The audience is invited not to identify with the male characters. The audience is positioned to view them as unsympathetic jerks.¹⁷² Now while Ron is playfully bantering with Leslie, he can only do so from a masculine perspective. While he might not be a jerk throughout the series, this particular scene casts his character as rather unsympathetic to Leslie’s situation. His comical depictions invite the audience to disassociate with his position and empathize with Leslie. Such depictions make men the spectacle for women to gaze upon: to see the harmful nature of sexism and patriarchy. Ron is simply teasing his friend Leslie, but his actions are important to note due to the fact that it calls attention to the structural inequalities women face in the government. At the end of the day, Ron was in fact chosen over Leslie to represent women. Metonymically, Ron, as patriarchy, takes the credit for the work that feminism has done. His actions, although humorous, significantly mark how patriarchy is able to hold this position of superiority over a marginalized group.

The second criteria of Cooper’s female gaze is “returning the look,” present in the unfolding of the episode, “Beauty Pageant” (October 1, 2009). In this episode, Leslie has been

selected to be a judge for the Miss Pawnee beauty pageant. At first this seems in line with a postfeminist reading. Leslie is actively supporting the objectification of women by participating in this contest. However, her reasoning is distinctly different. She asserts that if there is going to be a contest such as this, the selection should be made due the candidate's "talent and poise."¹⁷³ She enters into the contest very optimistically, hoping that it will be a positive thing for the community, and the new Miss Pawnee will be a role model for the community. But as she meets the judges (all of them men save for a former Miss Pawnee winner) she comes to understand that her conception of the pageant is much different than theirs. The other judges are discussing the pageant contestants' looks, which confounds Leslie. She cannot seem to understand why they would judge a woman based on a criterion of physical attractiveness.

The camera, in conjunction with Leslie's remarks, display the female gaze at work. At the beauty pageant, the judges take their seats and are introduced to the contestants. Leslie concludes there is a clear winner, Susan, a history major at Indiana State who plays classical piano and volunteers at the local children's hospital. However, the other judges unanimously favor Trish, a traditionally attractive young woman who expresses a love for America and general dislike for immigrants. Leslie speaks into the camera, and discusses how she likes Susan, and how her commitment to her values and job is admirable. The camera moves away from Leslie and begins to focus on Trish's body. Trish is bending down to pick up an item off the ground, and the camera zeroes in on her backside, exposing her legs and buttocks. Since her dress is short, not much is left to the imagination of the audience. This tracking shot can be read as a true example of the male gaze where the camera dwells upon the female form for the pleasure of men. Laura Mulvey argues the gaze "builds the pleasure of looking into its narrative structures and conventions."¹⁷⁴ But something remarkable happens when the audience comes to

realize the troubling nature of this camera action when Leslie loudly yells, “Over here!,” and glares into the camera with unshakeable disapproval. Instead of blindly allowing the camera to dictate the thoughts of the audience, Leslie stands in to correct patriarchal predilections. She won’t allow for the audience to engage in a masculinist reading. She corrects the actions of the camera person by calling out his actions. This action breaks the narrative, and offers a feminist meaning to the text that in turn “disturbs the status quo.”¹⁷⁵ The audience is pushed to consider what is transpiring on scene instead of understanding the scene through a patriarchal lens. The audience did not expect to be corrected for their voyeurism. In a more traditional, “status quo” text, the camera could have easily ruminated on the form of Trish’s body, allowing the audience to perversely gaze upon her as an object of sexual gratification. But Leslie calls this status quo into question by correcting the errors of the camera person. This is unique to the series as well as *Parks and Recreation* plays with documentary conventions, departing from multi-camera configuration generic of most situational comedies. In this case, the cameraperson is in the diegesis of Pawnee, and has to interact with the characters. In this way the viewers are partially responsible for the actions of the cameraperson, and see the world in this newly corrected gaze position.

The judges hastily decide that Trish will win the pageant. Leslie will not stand for this and sequesters the judges. She states that “Trish will win this pageant over my dead body.”¹⁷⁶ Leslie wants to see this pageant as an empowering contest for women, hoping that the winner will serve as a liaison for the community and role model for other young women in the Pawnee. Trish deeply adheres to a masculinist patriarchy, playing into harmful stereotypes of overt sexuality, stupidity, and exaggerated femininity. Leslie may not think Trish is the ideal candidate, but she certainly does not discount her value as a woman. In fact the judges merely

refer to Trish as “the hot one.”¹⁷⁷ When the judges begin to deliberate, one of the judges says, “The hot one won, by a landslide.”¹⁷⁸ Leslie is quick to correct this linguistic objectification by stating, “Well, her name is Trish.”¹⁷⁹ Although she might not agree with Trish and her vapid values, Leslie affords her the respect of a human being. Leslie is not a postfeminist character as she acts as the feminist voice of reason. She disagrees without blaming other women. Unable to convince them, the judges decide on Trish. Leslie makes a speech for Susan, stating that someday women like Susan, and all women, will be accepted on the basis of their values and contributions. Yes, if only someday would come.

Another example of “returning the look” occurs in the episode, “Hunting Trip.” Leslie, Ron, Tom Haverford, Ann Perkins, and Donna Meagle travel up to Ron’s woodland cabin for a hunting trip. Leslie, defying gender roles, is an excellent hunter and shoots the first bird. This in turn irks Ron, which results in a contest for who can bag the most birds. A gun shot is heard in the distance, and Ron screams out in pain. After realizing that the back of Ron’s head was grazed by a bullet. Ron demands to know who committed this vile act. Tom, the unlicensed hunter in the group, is the one who actually shot Ron. Because he could get in serious trouble, Leslie decides that she will take the blame. A park ranger comes to the camp to investigate the situation. After he implies that she did not know how to fire a gun (based on her gender), Leslie decides to flip the script on him. In a sequence of edited cuts from the interrogation Leslie delivers a litany of gendered reasons for the misfired gun:

I got that tunnel vision that girls get. I let my emotions get the best of me. I cared too much, I guess. I was thinking with my lady parts. I was walking and it felt icky. I thought there was gonna be chocolate. I don't even remember! I'm wearing a new bra, and it closes in the front, so it popped open and it threw me off. All I wanna do is have babies! I'm just going through a thing right now. I guess when my life is incomplete, I wanna just shoot someone. This would not happen if I had a penis! Bitches be crazy. I'm good at tolerating pain; I'm bad at math, and... I'm stupid.

Narratively, this explanation gets her friend Tom out of a legal situation, but rhetorically it functions to return the male gaze. The park ranger, inhabiting the male gaze, assumes that the accident occurred because she is a woman, who stereotypically, do not handle firearms. Leslie sarcastically delivers her explanation with sarcasm, illustrating in a humorous way how the male gaze is sexist. Instead of arguing with the ranger to point out his patriarchal worldview, Leslie delivers the explanation as a mockery of male-dominated perspectives.

Leslie's relationship with Ann Perkins is an example of Cooper's third criterion of the female gaze: the celebration of female friendships. Ann Perkins is a nurse turned engaged-citizen. After the two meet over an unseemly neighborhood pit, the two become best friends, and share in a genuine friendship. Narratively, female friendships are foregrounded throughout the program. Every thirteenth of February, Leslie hosts Galentine's Day, a celebration of the female friends in her life. She extends this celebration of friendship to the entire cavalcade of characters of the program because all friendships are important. Truly, Leslie highlights the importance of her female friends, but the diegetic universe of *Parks and Recreation* involves inclusivity. Viewers learn that the characters residing in Pawnee, Indiana, have diverse quirks and mannerisms that create a unique community headed by the ebullient Leslie Knope. By the time the program concludes, viewers are familiar with the characters and understand their motives. The friendships between the characters are integral to the program's progression. It is this relationship with the characters that allows the program to envision a more progressive, inclusive future for the United States.

In the final episode of the series, "One Last Ride" (2015), the "parks" gang congregates in the office for the last time to say goodbye before they go their separate ways. Although

Leslie's character is tried and true, the committed viewer has evolved to see the world as she envisions it, and we share in her relationships and perpetual hope for a better world. By the series end, the audience's curiosity about the futures of the cast of characters is satiated, but it is not business as usual. Andy and April are moving to Washington D.C., Ben and Leslie are in the throes of a Congressional election, and Tom is busy putting together his business venture. The viewer is thrown into the final episode *in medias res*. The viewer might feel a bit off-balanced, but committed viewers are familiar with the terrain and await the unexpected with anticipation. In familiar fashion, Leslie has over-prepared a list of notecards to properly commemorate the occasion. The narrative jumps forward without warning, granting the viewer the episode's operational aesthetic. Leslie is in the midst of her presentation, offering her group of friends a history of their time together. She has made it as far as 2005, when Ron interrupts and asks, "Perhaps we could skip ahead and just hit the highlights?" Leslie, now slightly disappointed that things are not going as she intended retorts, "I mean, I planned a comprehensive retrospective, but I guess I can just focus on the really important moments." This seemingly insignificant dialogue will frame how the rest of the episode will function. Instead of getting a "comprehensive retrospective" of the series' beloved characters, viewers can expect a series of "highlights," or important moments in the characters' lives. Viewers are not so much concerned about seeing a compilation of episodes past, but look toward the characters' ends. Through Leslie's optimism, we will learn how to say goodbye to our beloved characters. Jason Mittell discusses television endings both as "the final part of something," as well as "a goal or result that one seeks to achieve."¹⁸⁰ As a light-hearted, heartwarming broadcast comedy, viewers are not so concerned about "if" the characters are going to be harmed, but rather "how" the characters are going to thrive long after the closing credits of the final episode.

The program will use Leslie's relationships with her friends as the guiding pulse of the program, and metatextually interpellates the audience to consider their own relationships with the characters. Twelve sub-stories surface throughout the episode, lingering upon the ones that elicit a bit more rumination. Some of Leslie's relationships are simple and take only a few moments, like Donna Meagle, or the infamous Jean-Ralphio Saperstein. Other segments extend and allow viewers to luxuriate in the warmth of the characters' friendships, like Ron Swanson, who leaves his job as the CEO of the Very Good Building Company and becomes Superintendent of Pawnee National Park. Viewers may roll their eyes as Jean-Ralphio feigns his own death to make off with insurance money, and perhaps shed a tear as April and Andy welcome a new member to their team. Such stories are heartfelt, and help the viewer to accept that these stories function as an epilogue to characters who have populated broadcast screens for the better half of a decade.

It is important to note that the final episode's title is "One Last Ride," as it gestures to the past adventures the cast has had over the past several seasons. The title speaks to the bulk of the series—the many episodes that are not contained within this analysis where viewers learned to grow and love the characters, accept their idiosyncrasies, and reside for twenty-two minutes each week in the kooky town of Pawnee. The pilot episode invites us to explore the diegetic space of southern Indiana. The final episode gives us a glimpse into the future of our favorite Pawneean, and allows us to see into the future of the characters, a unique aspect of this episode. But the pilot and the finale cannot create a viewer's relationship to the characters. The pilot episode gives a mere outline. Leslie seems a bit out of touch with reality; Ron is a bit too stern; Jerry and Donna do not even have lines to speak. The final episode gives touching, thoughtful goodbyes. But the finale has not emotional weight without the relationship between the viewers and the on-

screen personalities. Donna's sacrifice to give up "treating herself" to create a non-profit foundation falls on deaf ears if the viewer is unfamiliar with Donna's previous "treat-yo-self" days, where she would spend exorbitant amounts of money on spa treatments and diamond watches. Ron's new appointment as the Superintendent of Pawnee National Park is little more than trivia if the viewer is unacquainted with Ron's deep attachment to the silence and peace of the rugged wilderness.

The program concluded much like it started, in the midst of things. The ending signals a future to be imagined. Although the viewers know what our characters are up to, there is still much left to our imagination. The best good bye is perhaps the one left open-ended. We are invited to consider a world where Jerry Gergich lives on to be the mayor of Pawnee, or April Ludgate-Dwyer helps youth discover their potential. The future of the characters is a more just world than the present day. Leslie Knope earns her dream to be the Governor of Indiana, perhaps even President of the United States. Ron Swanson, the self-avowed Libertarian, serves as a best man for a same-sex marriage. Ben and Leslie share a balanced union where gender roles are displayed and negotiated. All is well in the world of Pawnee, and it was indeed confirmed, Leslie Knope stops for no one. The program provides a vision for what the United States might well become if people join together and take part in civic life.

Conclusion

This chapter ties in closely with other feminist communication scholarship. The female gaze is a way in which the audience can oppose and openly critique patriarchal structures. Television is commonly held to be a patriarchal institution and *Parks and Recreation* operates within this framework to forward an alternative message. John Fiske writes that the dominant ideology of television is patriarchal in nature.¹⁸¹ The program operates as a capitalist political

economy, even if that message tries to counteract the structure. The fact that any mainstream media text offers feminist messages is nothing short of extraordinary. However, audience members must work to oppose this dominant ideology through counter-ideological tactics.¹⁸²

Parks and Recreation offers that window for audience members to read the text with a feminist sensibility.

This thesis also discusses the extent to which media texts can be feminist. Dow criticizes media, and how it “always [has] a hard time understanding the complexity of feminist ideology.”¹⁸³ Many well-regarded scholars assert that texts depicting women are often postfeminist and argue that feminism is textually absent. However, this analysis contributes to another conversation taking place that offers a different reading. Cooper relates to Stillion Southard’s argument that forwards a way of looking at seemingly patriarchal texts in an oppositional, polysemic fashion. Like Stillion Southard’s analysis of *Sex and the City*, *Parks and Recreation* is a fun, comfortable space for women (and other marginalized folks) to reject the heterosexual male gaze.¹⁸⁴ Further, this thesis contests patriarchal meanings, as it disrupts depoliticized portrayals of women in postfeminist television.¹⁸⁵ Leslie stands for values, values that can be read as feminist, providing a voice for egalitarianism on network television. Through incongruous humor and the female gaze, audience members are asked to consider how they operate within a patriarchal structure. The inanity of patriarchy is put on display, and we are asked to laugh with Leslie at Ron Swanson, and the counterintuitive women’s organization. *Parks and Recreation* challenges the contemporary media universe by asserting a strong feminist voice, a voice that, like Leslie’s, yells to the media “over here!” asking for us to reconsider feminism, and how it helps to create a positive change for U.S. political culture. Sheeler and Anders assert that in spite of prevalent misogyny, the status of women in American culture is

improving.¹⁸⁶ Leslie Knope might be one voice in a media universe of many, but *Parks and Recreation* offers a glimpse at a world that calls sexism into question in a way for audience members to consider alternatives to our contemporary realities.

Parks and Recreation offers a comic, feminist perspective to politics, where local politics works and provides for the citizenry. Such a worldview is a corrective frame to the more traditional framework of *House of Cards*, which ultimately reifies notions of political elitism, duplicity, and dishonesty. The rhetoric of *Parks and Recreation* is a hopeful one that argues how government can work by the people, for the people. Both programs should be viewed as texts responding to discourse. *House of Cards* conceptualizes our government as working for a select few, while *Parks and Recreation* offers that while democracy may be hard, it is worth the struggle.

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPLICATIONS OF NARRATIVE POLITICAL FICTION

Narrative political television programs are cultural artifacts that citizens interact with on a daily basis. Because of their prevalence within democracy, they provide an influential site of communication and rhetorical influence. This thesis has examined two generically political television programs, *Parks and Recreation*, and *House of Cards*. In this final chapter, I review my critical claim and findings, relate those findings to the field of Communication Studies, discuss the limitations of my analysis, and propose areas for research that further explore the affiliation between political discourse and popular texts.

Review of Research Question: Political Sensibilities of Political Television

This thesis first contributes to our understanding of how political fictions operate to promote a political sensibility. In order to study the themes of these programs, I utilized a rhetorical framework to bring out the political themes of the television shows. Utilizing incongruity humor theory and the female gaze, I analyzed how *Parks and Recreation* promotes a feminist political sensibility, asking the audience to consider all people as equals in sociopolitical life. *House of Cards* departs from this conclusion, and instead adopts a Machiavellian sensibility, promoting a lavish elitism that portrays representative government as a class of scheming political entities. Both *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* portray politics in differing ways, offering “equipment for living” in a democratic republican government. This is especially important to consider during election years as these messages may affect how voters respond to the discourse of politicians and legislators. Television and digital media frame our political process.

While this study only examined narrative television, the implication for the field of Communication Studies is far-reaching. As we move into a largely visual, digital culture, it is important to assess how media texts influence our understanding of contemporary politics. Barry Brummett asserts that usually when scholars look at media texts, we discuss their aesthetic or historical value.¹⁸⁷ While that remains an important part of media scholarship, this criticism examines how television disseminates messages about civic life. By utilizing the work of Kenneth Burke, we come to understand how both *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* contribute to political discourse. Each text offers “equipment[s] for living,” by adopting different frames for understanding. The intention of this thesis extended a body of research and further situated narrative political television as equipment for living in a fragmented political society. Whereas *Parks and Recreation* offered a comic incongruity allowing us to consider various ways of viewing political discourse, *House of Cards* heralds a Machiavellian ethic, creating a divide between representatives and their constituents. The programs about politics are an equipment of sorts that invites U.S. audiences to confront their ever-changing understandings of democratic society. The very fact that they present an argument at all denotes Thomas Farrell’s assertion that “rhetoric is the only art responsible for the imitation and expression of public thought.”¹⁸⁸ Both programs express and respond to public discourses that allow audiences to assess political discourse through differing lenses. One structure gives a communitarian, comic view, and the other presents a more troublesome, duplicitous approach.

Parks and Recreation allows audiences to adopt a comic frame for understanding American politics. Burke’s assessment asserts that “people are necessarily mistaken. . . every insight contains its own special kinds of blindness.”¹⁸⁹ In a humorous and lighthearted way, the characters and plot discuss complex political situations by placing all interested parties at fault.

From Leslie, to the local media, to the citizens, each party has something to learn from the events that occur in Pawnee. Instead of adopting clear heroes and villains, all of the characters in *Parks and Recreation* have a lesson to learn. This promotes a type of community understanding and forwards the adoption a comic frame, allowing audiences to “subtly change. . . the rules of the game. . . and make assets out of liabilities.”¹⁹⁰ The true difference lies in who is at fault, in *Parks and Recreation*, the main problem is everyone. All people are susceptible to mistakes, and we are able to see that in the humorous flaws of the characters. In *House of Cards* the problem of political duplicity is on full display, but because Frank Underwood succeeds, the power of the viewer/citizen is diminished. With the differing equipments provided *Parks and Recreation*, a situation comedy, offers a more nuanced approach to twenty-first century America. Such depictions allow us to be flawed, but work together to make our complicated nation a better place.

Second, this study can contribute to our understanding of non-dialogic elements of television and political messages. Many of the previous rhetorical studies of political popular culture do an excellent job describing and analyzing dialogue and text. In both chapters, I utilized non-dialogic elements of the text to describe how the text argued for a political sensibility. In Chapter Two, I utilized elements such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, and scoring to explore *House of Cards* duplicitous, princely political style. In Chapter Three, I discussed camera movement in regards to Cooper’s Female Gaze theory and how characters, camera movement, and dialogue influences audiences to consider their own patriarchal predilections. As rhetorical scholars, it is important to consider the multiple communications that occur within a multimodal text. While it is not possible to consider all messages within a television text, in depth analysis of non-dialogic elements elicit promising rhetorical results.

Limitations

In addition to the ways this thesis contributes to the field of Communication Studies, this project possesses a few limitations. Analytically, the main limitations of this project are the number of case studies in my analysis, the assumption of audience receptivity, and the selection of politically themed television programs on television.

I chose *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* based on their stylistic and generic differences. *Parks and Recreation* is a bright, colorful situation comedy on NBC, while *House of Cards* is a dark, gritty political drama found on Netflix, a digital streaming service. I surmised that while many audience members might be familiar with both texts, the fact that both of them differed in style and genre, readers might be familiar with at least *one* of them. I chose two, hoping that the stylistic differences would promote differing political sensibilities. I went in depth on each program, mining for political possibilities. However, there are a number of politically themed programs. An in-depth analysis would be warranted to corroborate my findings. For a master's thesis, two case studies was a manageable and possible undertaking. A longer project would require more case studies.

A final limitation of this study is my focus on politically themed television programs. Both *Parks and Recreation* and *House of Cards* feature government as part of the narrative elements. Whether it is Pawnee City Hall, or the White House, we often think about political television occurring in a political space. The scope of thesis only examined programs occurring in a governmental diegesis, but the idea of political ideology is not new to the television industry. Television underwent a major political shift during the sixties making politics, race, and gender a large part of the social discourse. Political messages abounded in late 1970s sitcoms, and a

decade of "relevance" television was born.¹⁹¹ Norman Lear's programs like *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *Maude* (1972-1978), and *The Jefferson's* (1975-1985) garnered critical acclaim while Mary Tyler Moore and Grant Tinker created programs that soared in popularity, while promoting the sexual and cultural values of a changing United States.¹⁹² These programs did not narratively occur in the White House or City Hall, but in homes and workplaces. Analyzing non-political shows, or shows that do not occur in a governmental diegesis, but promote a political sensibility is an avenue for further exploration and discussion.

Although the mise-en-scene, the costuming, and even the era of these programs are clearly dated, the themes of "the Lear years" continue to resonate to the contemporary moment. In the episode "We're Still Having a Heatwave" Archie is having trouble understanding the gender roles between his new neighbors, the Lorenzos. Because the wife repairs appliances and the husband cooks dinner, Archie wonders if Mr. Lorenzo is a "fag." Unlike Archie, his neighbor, Mr. Lorenzo wears brightly colored clothing, cooks gourmet meals for his wife, and constantly is singing opera and show tunes. The program then centers on gender roles, and we are challenged both by Archie and the other opinions that brush up against his own. The language "fag" may be politically incorrect, but they remind us that people do in fact hold preconceived notions, ones that are often ridiculous and hurtful. Throughout the episode, Archie gets into fights with Mike about the legitimacy of the Nixon Watergate scandal, discusses gender roles between himself and his wife, and negotiates friendship with Mr. Jefferson on the basis of his skin color, and that of the new neighbor who is Puerto Rican. This program dialogued with issues occurring at the time of production, such as the Vietnam War, Women's Liberation and the Gay Rights movements. Clearly this program focused on the treatment of issues and negotiated a way to interpret political occurrences. As Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch assert,

programs such as *All in the Family*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, *M*A*S*H*, and other selected programs of the seventies, “emphasize a treatment of issues.”¹⁹³

Archie Bunker, the offensive, bigoted patriarch of the *All in the Family* reflects the political insecurities of the 1970s. In the 1970s, gay identity and activism made its way into political consciousness. With Harvey Milk’s famous declamations for equality and the oft cited Stonewall uprising in 1969, signaled a marked change in American culture¹⁹⁴. Although hailed by progressives and activists, the changing demographic of the country sparked political controversy. In a fight for political stability, conservatives in California famously instituted the Briggs Initiative, a state wide ballot that would have banned homosexual men and women from working in California public schools. The 1970s was a tumultuous political time for LGBTQ folks. *All in the Family* stood in as a televisual rendering of prejudice and homophobia in American culture and reflected the social norms of the day.

All too often popular critics bemoan the fact that programs akin to *All in the Family* are absent from our contemporary screens. *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum posits that Archie, the prototype for the modern protagonist “represented the danger and the potential of television itself, its ability to influence viewers rather than merely help them kill time.”¹⁹⁵ Indeed if you consider the most popular programs in 1972 and 2015, the lists diverge on political messages and social relevance.

1972	2015
1. <i>All in the Family</i>	1. <i>Big Bang Theory</i>
2. <i>Sanford & Son</i>	2. <i>NCIS</i>
3. <i>Hawaii Five-O</i>	3. <i>The Walking Dead</i>

4. <i>Maude</i>	4. <i>Empire</i>
5. <i>Bridget Loves Bernie</i>	5. <i>NCIS: New Orleans</i>
6. <i>The NBC Mystery Movie</i>	6. <i>Blue Bloods</i>
7. <i>Mary Tyler Moore Show</i>	7. <i>Dancing with the Stars</i>

In 1972, five of the top seven programs included controversial, political, or socially relevant themes. *All in the Family* was about white, working class Archie Bunker and his failure to grasp the changing world around him. *Sanford & Son* highlighted the life of a working-class black father and son. *Maude* famously took on women’s political issues like abortion and contraception. *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1972-1973) was another controversial program, portraying the marriage between Catholic schoolteacher, Bridget, and her spouse, Jewish cab driver, Bernie. Today, popular discourse writes off the *Big Bang Theory* (2007-2016), *NCIS* (2003-2016) (and its progeny), *Blue Bloods* (2010-2016), and *Dancing with the Stars* (2005-2016) as mass entertainment, holding no cultural value whatsoever.

However, my thesis questions the assumption that television in the contemporary moment is devoid of political import. In fact, programs like *Modern Family*, have increasingly adopted politicized messages, discussing diverse issues such as LGBTQ rights. Further scholarship should explore the political implications of “non-political” programs, which have the ability to tease out difficult subject matter more freely. This thesis reads this politicization as a democratic good, filling the airwaves with important subject matter to the United States electorate. For example, let us consider the recent political discourse surrounding LGTBQ rights in the United States.

LGBTQ people now experience greater visibility in politics and media. The social climate in the United States has shifted over recent decades and has seen increased rights for LGBTQ folks. The United States Supreme Court overturned state sodomy laws, making same-sex acts legal in every state.¹⁹⁶ More recently, a decision in 2015 guaranteed marriage rights to same-sex couples in all U.S. states and territories.¹⁹⁷ Kaitlyn Jenner's public announcement of her identity became a visible marker to the changing political times in the United States. Although this is seen as a positive for progressive Americans, there is still a fair amount of prejudice and distrust among Americans toward gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender people. Mary E. Kite and Kinsey Blue-Bryant Lees attribute the prejudice of LGBTQ individuals specifically to the lack of education about gender identity and sexual orientation.¹⁹⁸ As discussed in the two analysis chapters, television can provide citizens with equipment for living. Television can act as a space for folks to hash out difficult, changing situations. Fictional programs depicting LGTBQ folks are often found on niche-oriented networks and streaming programs. However, broadcast networks are using this political development in the narrative elements of their programs as well, allowing a broader audience to grapple with non-heterosexual discourses.

Another marker of gay identity is *Modern Family*, which reigns as the most popular comedy on ABC, and at times, grapples with political issues. The story lines deal with living in a family and dealing with family matters such as honesty, responsibility, and adherence to collective family prescriptive and proscriptive rules. Because the show is so groundbreaking for representing the many different co-cultures that co-exist in American society, the show itself places gendered barriers on all of the characters. The most problematic of these representations are of the gay couple, Cameron Tucker and Mitchell Pritchett. As critical media scholars we know that media texts have difficulty representing identity and race in a socially acceptable

manner. Cameron is a stereotypical gay man pigeonholed into serving as the heteronormative role of a domestic mother. In the eleventh episode of the first season Cameron explicitly avows to be the “stay-at-home dad slash trophy wife.” Cameron stays at home to take care of the adopted daughter, Lily. He often is found cooking, cleaning, and nearly always placed within the sphere of the home. In season one, episode eleven, Cameron spends most of the time watching over the care and protection of Lily. Again he states explicitly that he has accepted his role, not as a gay male raising his child, but a mother. He states that he’s “like a mother bear. When I hear my cub crying, I have to run to her.” In many ways Cameron does not embody heteronormative masculinity; rather Cameron embodies the stereotype of *the wife*, a representation of a female domestic role. Film and television scholar Bill Nichols states that the wife is strongly associated with the space of the home. She (or in this case, he) stays at home and keeps the home fires burning while the husband fights the battle of public life. The wife also exaggerates the role as nurturing and sacrificial.¹⁹⁹ Like Nichols’ description, Cameron is a male version of the age-old wife that objectifies an entire population and denies LGBTQ identities a unique sense of identity.

However, there are times in the episode where the characters confront political issues in regards to LGBTQ rights. In “Patriot Games,” Mitchell and Cameron run into some of their friends at a store. Their friends inform them about a protest happening at a local, artisan pizza place, who does not support gay rights. Unsurprisingly, Cameron and Mitchell love the restaurant and do not wish to participate in the protest. The friends accuse Cameron and Mitchell about not being very political. In a huff, they agree to participate in the protest. They arrive early to the restaurant. While no one is watching, they agree to eat there. On their way out the protesters block the exit, and Cameron and Mitchell must confess to the protesters that they in fact did eat there in spite of the restaurant’s political affiliation. On the surface, it seems like a

rather conventional B-story line in an American sitcom. However, it must be contextualized within a larger conversation taking place. Contextualized, this episode speaks to several discourses occurring in American politics, including corporations being able to exercise religious freedom. It reminds audience members of protests that occurred in 2012 after Chik-Fil-A chief operating officer Dan T. Cathy made remarks on the illegitimacy of same-sex marriage. LGBTQ activists surrounded restaurants around the country, large cities like Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago announced the stoppage of new franchises openings in the area. Indiana's controversial Religious Freedom Restoration Act, introduced in 2015, would have allowed businesses to refuse transactions to LGBTQ folks based on sexual orientation or sexual difference. It might be a simple storyline, but it captures and displays the political climate of the United States, where choosing where to eat has become a political act in itself. Further scholarship could investigate how "non-political" programs dialogue with political discourse in this fashion.

Future research could also quantitatively analyze how people responded to texts as political messages. Through interviews and questionnaires, this study could empirically discuss whether or not these texts had any effect on how they interact with political discourse. This analysis could either corroborate or challenge my findings. An audience analysis might also be helpful in that it could uncover how the audience is interacting with text, and how it makes them feel as citizens of a democratic republic.

A final venue of future research would be to create a typology for studying the rhetorical and political aspects of music and sound in television. Delving more deeply into the literature of Greg Goodale, Joshua Gunn, Simon Frith, and others would be a sensible place to look for connections into rhetorical theory and praxis. In Chapter Three I analyzed avenues of how music

informs the political sensibility of a text. Sound is such a necessary aspect to the persuasive elements of texts, and needs to be taken seriously by scholars of communication. A larger project, such as a dissertation would be an excellent place to do this critical and theoretical project.

Final Thoughts

In my thesis I discovered two frames for understanding American politics, one tragic, the other comic. As a scholar who believes in the power of a democratic government, I argue that we adopt a comic frame for viewing politics. Instead of adopting a frame of heroes and villains, we should approach our political positions as flawed, and subject to change. We, as citizens, should embrace a community understanding and forward the adoption a comic frame, allowing to make changes that benefit all. I do not merely intimate that we only argue for our own causes, but see these causes as a way to engage a common goal. Working toward a common goal, with the knowledge that we are flawed, will help us to “subtly change. . . the rules of the game. . . and make assets out of liabilities.”²⁰⁰ I ask us to consider how we as humans frame our understanding of political discourse, and how our frame in turn influences others to make decisions that impacts our everyday lives.

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