

Disenchantment of the Empire? Ideology, Narrative Structure, and Musical Tropes in the Opening Credits of HOUSE OF CARDS

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Using the opening sequence of the TV series HOUSE OF CARDS as a case study, in this article I explore the role of the symphonic soundtrack as a contributor to the narrative. My analysis of the audiovisual tropes of the opening credits, compared and contrasted with other shows and feature films exploring similar topics, ultimately paints a radical shift in American society, particularly with regards to its own government. The ideology of HOUSE OF CARDS heralds the transformation of the social imagination: from the idealized and satisfied past extending from the postwar years up until the end of the 20th century, into a cynical and disenchanted present.¹

Between 2013 and 2018, Netflix released Seasons 1 through 6 of the show HOUSE OF CARDS. This series, a global success—both commercial and critical, is one of the most-watched shows in their entire library. The superb production values of the show are naturally reflected in the visual treatment of the initial credits. The opening featured a time-lapse montage of majestic views of the capitol of the United States, Washington, D.C. Notwithstanding that the time lapse creates an impression of speed, the long shots of the capitol city are

1 For widely-established research on the connection between film music and ideology, see the seminal monographs, Gorbman, Claudia (1987) *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Indiana University Press, and Flinn, Caryl (1992) *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*. Princeton University Press.

almost static, with very little zoom or panning, as if the viewers were watching an album of postcards.

The iconic sights are so imposing, however, that they become cold and impersonal. As the credits unfold, an entire day rapidly evolves, from the morning to midday to sunset to late night. The duration of the entire opening credit sequence is one minute, thirty-five seconds. The exact progression of this metaphorical day is not accurately defined, but shadows indicative of the afternoon start appearing early in the clip, around the 30-second mark. Night has definitely fallen by the 44-second mark, which is halfway through the clip. This is where we see the color of the sky changing from blue to black, and in fact, we see this same important event again at the 50-second mark, in a different postcard. The emphasis is therefore on the later portion of the day, and in the process of going from light to darkness.

Whereas we see movement and actions (lights and shadows, and even clouds traveling through the landscape) not a single actual human being can be seen. Cars in the streets move too fast to reveal even the glance of a face, any human volition, and instead mimic the behaviour of an ant colony, or perhaps simply a robotic machine. It would seem that this album features photos taken by a mildly disoriented tourist taking a chartered day tour and feeling a bit lost in the city, rather than a savvy insider. Some shots are logical in this context—looking at the Capitol building from the distance—but many are aloof, poorly framed, as if taken with a fixed-lens camera from inside a car, and not capturing an ideal composition in the frame.

In cinematic terms, this portrayal of the city has a whiff of Godfrey Reggio's *KOYANISQATSI* (USA 1983). Could perhaps the time lapse convey a subtext equally pessimistic as in this movie from 1982, scored by Phillip Glass? The time-lapse allows for the entire day to unfold in just over a minute and half, frantically. But the visual pace contradicts the weight and gravity of the score. The tempo is not slow (the pulse hovers around 97 beats per minute), but there is a heavy prevalence of melodies in the low register. Furthermore, the rhythmic contour of the melodies emphasizes very long durations, even if other elements of the texture maintain the rhythmic surface active at the sixteenth-note level. Some notes of the melody are held for up to two measures. We could interpret the unrelenting quadruple meter, and the steady presence of the beat, as indications that, in this story, things move forward.

Example 1, »Motifs, Phrase Structure,« illustrates the main themes of the opening soundtrack. The symphonic language matches the elegance and power conveyed by the images. The music is majestic in its symphonic scope and textural complexity. The impression is not of triumph, however, but of omen and tragedy: predominantly minor harmonies (a touch of the Dorian mode), and the late entrance of the violins in an extremely high register feature a descending minor tetrachord in the key of the subdominant.

A rhythmically complex and very active ostinato pattern in the electric bass introduces and bids farewell to the credits in a manner akin to a narrator. Gradually, additional musical forces—vectors of the power grid—enter the picture: A trumpet with its Diana-like motif, the low strings featuring the main melody in unison, the occasional strumming of a distorted electric guitar

Integration of the Solo Trumpet (modified) and Solo Piano Motifs

6
trumpet
piano
etc.

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef. It begins with a measure containing a whole rest. The second measure contains a quarter note followed by a quarter rest. The third measure contains a piano dynamic marking above the staff and a series of eighth notes with accents. The staff ends with 'etc.'.

11
Main Melody (Low Strings)

i v iv I iv I iv

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef. It contains a sequence of notes with slurs and ties. Below the staff, the Roman numerals i, v, iv, I, iv, I, iv are aligned with the notes.

23
Variation of the Main Melody (Low Strings)

Major/Minor Power Chord
i v/V iv I iv I iv

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef, similar to the previous one but with a variation in the notes. Below the staff, the Roman numerals i, v/V, iv, I, iv, I, iv are aligned with the notes. The text 'Major/Minor Power Chord' is written above the staff.

32
Descending Tetrachord (High Strings): "Shadows Descending"?

8va

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef. It contains a sequence of notes with slurs and ties, marked with an 8va dynamic. The notes descend in pitch across the measures.

The unifying pulse between the visual and the aural dimensions of the sequence is the shot, accented by the proximity of the downbeat of each measure: There are 38 measures and »38 postcards.« An elemental requirement of visual fluency requires that shots are not equally spaced in time as if they were presented in a Powerpoint presentation, so the correspondence between barlines and shots cannot be exact all the time. However, the coincidence is within the standard two- to three-frame tolerance in several instances: measures 2, 7, 8, 17,

18, 19, 26. There are several more quasi-matches between postcards and barlines (that is to say, they are close, without being so exactly synchronized).

It does not take a great leap of one's imagination to conclude that the tropes featured in the opening credits (ominous music and dark images) contribute together to project the sordid world of politics: betrayal, ambition, even murder. The elegance, wealth, and majesty of the sights, however, remind viewers that these intrigues are not just any intrigues, but events of a global transcendence, relevant to every country in the planet by virtue of the influence of the United States across the globe.

The composer of this beautiful score, Jeff Beals, has spoken about what he intended:

The show is all about the underbelly of Washington, the dark corners of what you don't see, and what really happens, as opposed to sort of THE WEST WING, you know, heroic, more aspirational, the sort of »Hail to the Chief« Washington, the typical film score gestures about the capitol and politics.²

The impressions projected by the music, confirmed by the composer himself, are logical or even unremarkable given what we know about the story: the main character, no matter his charm, is certainly a villain. But this ideology becomes intriguing when we compare them with the cultural ancestors of this show, even its recent ones. The most obvious of such ancestors is the series with the same name, HOUSE OF CARDS, broadcasted in England twenty five years ago. The

² Accessed from: <http://traffic.libsyn.com/songexploder/SongExploder7.mp3> (no longer online).

story, in four episodes, is set after the end of Margaret Thatcher's ten-year tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The show was televised by the BBC during November and December 1990, to critical and popular acclaim. It was based on a novel by Michael Dobbs, who had been a former Chief of Staff at Conservative Party headquarters.

The opening sequence of the 1990 British version is so different from Netflix's 2013 that it is hard to believe that both shows are essentially one and the same. The differences are many, both in visual as well as aural terms. But the American version is indeed based on the exact same novel by Michael Dobbs, and the story is developed quite similarly.

The soundtrack of the British HOUSE OF CARDS is a kind of *faux* Handel, featuring a pompous fanfare in the major mode, played by a brass ensemble. It has a middle section that features a more modern rhetoric, and perhaps could be described as a mix between Rossini and Verdi, and then a return to the A section, but now with a phrase extension to make the final cadence more conclusive. The anachronistic nature of the music, alluding to times gone by, matches nicely the historical traditional sights (not quite seen as »postcards,« but almost), such as Westminster's Abbey and the British Parliament. Needless to say, in both »A« sections of the music, cadences resolve satisfyingly in the tonic, after equally satisfying tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic progressions. The repeated notes in the brasses, accented by the occasional dotted figuration in the melody, portray perhaps the bounce of the horses as they march before the king. In the middle section, which probably paints the *imbroglio* of the plot, the tempo seems faster—even though it isn't—because of the rhythmic

diminution. The imbroglia is also painted with frequent solos and imitation between groups of instruments, complete with the occasional chromatic double neighbours, augmented sixth chords, and slides in the brass. The overall effect is that of comical mockery. Rossini would have been proud. A short Retransition brings back the material from the A section—a return to the established order, perhaps.

We could justify the cultural differences simply by saying that one show is British and the other, American. We could compare the architectural features of 10 Downing Street, the residence of the Prime Minister, vs. the White House, or the comparative sizes and geopolitical influences of both countries, and these analogies of scale would also be true. But, aside from these justifications, the question that I find most interesting is why it is only in 2013, more than 20 years after the British version was broadcasted, that the show finally found its way across the Atlantic. In order to answer this question, for a moment, let's consider a few shows which portrayed, in a way or another, the President of the United States, as hinted at by composer Jeff Beals, quoted above.

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT (*USA 1995, Rob Reiner*)

The publicity stills of THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT could have been »Cinderella«'s, or perhaps »Sleeping Beauty.« Akin to the way Disney presented the Prince and Cinderella, the still portrays the main characters dancing in a formal gala, impeccably dressed, their eyes locked in rapture, with

the backdrop of the American flag. In this story, the President, a handsome widower, is presented as the sexiest, smartest, most coveted man in the country. Accordingly, he was portrayed by actor Michael Douglas, who back then was in his prime. The allusion to noted charmer, Bill Clinton, is hard to miss.

The opening credits slowly give us a tour of revered objects from the White House Museum. In the slow panning made famous by Ken Burns' historical documentaries, we glance at pictures of Harry Truman, FDR, Teddy Roosevelt, a bust of Abraham Lincoln, a Civil War hand-sown American flag, the Bald Eagle, venerable edited volumes of »Messages and Papers of the Presidents,« and so on. Wood and silver, as well as noble brownish hues, predominate. The final cadence is reached exactly when we see a long shot of the White House at dawn on a radiant sunny morning with birds chirping, the grass of the lawn still fresh with dew. The morning allusion in the orchestral topic ties back with Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, the quintessential »American« work of the 20th century³ and, further back in time, to Beethoven's symphonic language.⁴

These aural and visual tropes paint a picture of nobility, grandeur, and exultation, crystalizing a future full of possibility. The kernel of the story is that

3 Aaron Copland's music came to be identified as »quintessentially American« largely after the premiere of his iconic large-scale works from the 1940s, including »Appalachian Spring,« for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944, plus others such as BILLY THE KID, RODEO, or A LINCOLN PORTRAIT. In part because of his compositional output during that period, but also because of his towering influence in American music throughout the twentieth century, Copland is often referred to as the »Dean of American Music.« See: United States Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200182578>, accessed on March 20, 2019.

4 For a comprehensive study of the »heroic« topic in Beethoven, see: Burnham, Scott (2000) *Beethoven Hero*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

the President faces the prospect of taking a stand against companies which hurt the environment. It's a leap of courage for the benefit of all of mankind, but also a leap of courage to listen to his own heart and, by doing what's right, also get the girl of his dreams.

THE WEST WING: Opening Credits, Season 1 (USA 1999, Aaron Sorkin)

This TV series, which run from 1999 through 2006, could be considered a spinoff from *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, if nothing else because it was conceived and developed by the same playwright, Aaron Sorkin, projecting the exact same ideology and even recycling some of its cast (for instance, Martin Sheen is the Chief of Staff in *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, and then he is the President in *THE WEST WING*). When we look at the opening credits, we realize right away that the characters (who work every day at the White House, as the presidential staff) are serious, respectable, responsible people. We see them in action and then »immortalized« in black and white stills during their best moments, perhaps through the lens of the press. The highly positive tone of the music, painting a topic not far off from *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, helps convey that these members of the White House staff are individuals with depth, with convictions, with a spiritual life. They believe in what they do, and even if they happen to have the most important job in the country, they don't let pride or vanity get the best of them. We come to respect them, to appreciate them. They are selfless and ready to go the extra mile if necessary, for the good of the country.

AIR FORCE ONE (USA/DE 1997, Wolfgang Petersen)

In this film, the opening credits are extremely bare from a visual point of view, featuring only the text over a black background. The narrative is left entirely to the music, which expresses an unequivocally heroic (albeit militaristic) topic: heavy brasses and snare drum, major mode, decisive and steady tempo. This topical choice matches the story, in that the President (embodied by action star Harrison Ford) really acts as a soldier, even if a very special one. The triumph against the odds proves that, once again, the President is a hero practically without flaws.

INDEPENDENCE DAY (USA 1996, Roland Emmerich)

In this film, it is the whole of mankind that is at risk, attacked by an alien force. Just before the decisive battle to expel the enemy and reclaim the planet, the President addresses his troops. In this rousing speech, accompanied by a gigantic symphonic crescendo once again featuring a heroic topic in a Beethovenian style, THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT graciously »donates« the 4th of July to the whole of mankind; by virtue of this decree this day becomes the most important holiday for the entire world. In hindsight, it's remarkable and telling that Americans would be so confident in their global leadership and that foreign audiences would also be accepting of this idea.

All of these examples paint a uniform picture of respect towards THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT and its associated symbols, disseminated by the film industry within and outside America's borders. In turn, some of the features of these assertive and reassuring openings can be traced to the world of news broadcasting.

THE NEWSHOUR WITH JIM LEHRER (*USA 1997, Robert MacNeil/Jim Lehrer*)

One example of equivalent respect towards the American institutions can be inferred from the 1990s opening of Jim Lehrer's THE NEWSHOUR. This is not just any broadcast news show. This show was created by Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer on the heels of their previous coverage of the United States Senate Watergate hearings for PBS, for which they both had won an Emmy Award. Because of this inception, the tone of the show was unequivocally serious, sophisticated, far from the kind of insubstantial news that we are now used to watching and have been ridiculed in ANCHORMAN: THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY (*USA 2004, Adam McKay*).

In THE NEWSHOUR WITH JIM LEHRER, the trumpet call is used as a trope which summons several qualities: a call to action, solemnity, attention. The melodic gesture featured in the trumpet is integrated here within a pseudo Hindemith-inspired harmonic context, all of it alluding to a kind of sophisticated American neoclassicism.

If we go further in time and watch newsreels from the 1960s, 1950s, and even 1940s, we can see further examples where the figure of the president was associated to that of decisive commander in chief, entirely appropriate for times of war. Notable examples include »Kennedy, the Five-Day Tour« (1963), and »Truman: Vacations of a President« (1944).

In sum, the ideological contrast between earlier portrayals of the president, the presidency, or the American government, compared to the type of music used in *HOUSE OF CARDS* is, once again, most remarkable. The reasons for such a positive portrayal of the American institutions, and, by extension, on the United States' leadership around the world, can be explained through historical reasons. In 1989, the Berlin wall fell, marking the end of the Cold War, the victory of the United States, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. And shortly afterwards, in 1990, Francis Fukuyama predicted the »end of History«: with Communism eliminated, Capitalism would finally triumph and humankind would evolve towards its next (and last) stage of development:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁵

In *Specters of Marx*, published in 1993, Jacques Derrida analyzes Fukuyama's book as taking part in the intellectual branch of current Western hegemony and

5 Fukuyama, Francis (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

the spreading of its »New Gospel« of liberal democracy. Indeed, with the collapse of the Soviet Union only one superpower was left standing. The reality of the 1990s, particularly Bill Clinton's second presidency, would seem to confirm Derrida's reading of Fukuyama. During his administration, Clinton masterfully administered this new, now uncontested global leadership, advancing the »soft power« doctrine, building strong consensus during international crises (such as the Tequila financial meltdown or the ethnic-religious conflict in Kosovo), opening up trade to China, forging NAFTA with Canada and Mexico, all the while placing the strongest strategic bet on turning the USA into a predominantly service economy, with a special focus on information technology. Incidentally, it is during this time that the entertainment industry became the top export of the USA:

International sales of software and entertainment products totaled \$60.2 billion in 1996, more than any other U.S. industry, according to Commerce Department data and industry figures. Since 1991, when the collapse of the Soviet Union opened new markets around the world to the United States, total exports of intellectual property from the United States have risen nearly 94 percent in dollar terms, these statistics indicate.⁶

These were the years of the dot-com bubble, paying off the public debt, ending unemployment, and awarding the American upper middle class a phenomenal increase in equity through low interest rates and a booming stock market. This overly optimistic cycle came crashing down with the Twin Towers and the stock

6 Farhgi, Paul/Rosenfeld, Megan (1998) American Pop Penetrates Worldwide. *The Washington Post*, October 25.

market meltdown in 2001. It was at the very beginning of this optimistic post-cold-war cycle that Michael Dobson wrote his novel, *House of Cards*. From a British perspective, Margaret Thatcher now gone, it was a nostalgic, tongue-and-cheek, mildly provincial story of ingenious intrigues in the palace. No wonder that the show was not picked up for broadcast in the United States: Americans were in a completely different wavelength at the time.

Composer Snuffy Walden, talking about his score for the opening credits of *THE WEST WING*, described the music as a »gospel,« perhaps—unknowingly—giving further credence to Derrida:

If you boil it down to its essence, it's just a little gospel piece. It's very simple; a spiritual kind of gospel piece, just on piano. But as soon as you add French horns and the strings and everything, it becomes very [Aaron] Copland-esque.⁷

To say it bluntly, in the 1990s, Americans—and Hollywood—were in love with the White House, Air Force One, the first lady, or any other synecdoche of the President itself. It makes perfect sense that *HOUSE OF CARDS* finally disembarked in America not during the roaring 1990s but during the last portion of Obama's second presidency, in 2012. Taking a quick inventory of America's performance during the earlier portion of the 21st century, societal misadventures and disenchantments quickly pile up: the Florida recount decided by a single vote in the Supreme Court in 2000-2001, implosion of the

⁷ Anonymous (2015) *Scoring the West Wing: Questions and Answers with W.G. Snuffy Walden*. Empire Online. Online: <https://www.empireonline.com/west-wing/snuffywalden.html>
Accessed on December 17, 2020.

stock-market-bubble, implosion of the real-state bubble, fall of the Twin Towers, Anthrax scare, Beltway Sniper Attacks, Nowhere-to-be-found Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, Flood of New Orleans, Wiki Leaks, Snowden and the NSA, Occupy Wall Street, realizing that having a Black president in the White House would not mean any significant change to the status quo. The only thing for sure, at the end of this fifteen-year cavalcade, was that the thinnest upper layer of the socioeconomic pyramid had become much richer, and everybody else poorer. By 2012, the pin finally dropped. With all hope and trust exhausted, the American public now shared the disenchantment of a British Conservative at the end of Margaret Thatcher's ten-year tenure, and was ready for desperate measures, paving the way for Donald Trump to become president and making a reality of what seemed unthinkable at any other point in time since WWII.

One of the main problems with American democracy, and probably one of the main reasons behind Occupy Wall Street (September-November) 2011, was the lack of legitimate representation. People would not decide to camp in a park for days and weeks on end if they felt that somebody was going to bat for them and address their needs. But the occupiers did not feel that anybody was carrying their voice in the circles of power. In an article published in *The Washington Post* in December 2011—shortly after Occupy Wall Street was dispersed by the NYPD—it was reported that

Between 1984 and 2009, the median net worth of a member of the House more than doubled, according to the analysis of financial disclosures, from \$280,000 to \$725,000 in inflation-adjusted 2009 dollars, excluding home equity. Over the same

period, the wealth of an American family has declined slightly, with the comparable median figure sliding from \$20,600 to \$20,500... The growing disparity between the representatives and the represented means that there is a greater distance between the economic experience of Americans and those of lawmakers.⁸

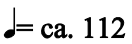
A privileged financial status means that, in many cases, lawmakers are far more protected from their own policies than their represented. The lawmakers's decisions don't carry personal risks for them, only for their represented. A prosperous society admires its leaders, and has confidence in the future. Conversely, an unfair and unjust society does not trust its leaders, and does not have high hopes for a future of happiness. As shown by the analysis of the opening credits, *HOUSE OF CARDS* features an undeniable and radical ideological shift in the musical portrait of the United States government, reversing decades of positive reinforcement. Having retained its sheer power, the president and most of the political elite are depicted in this show as ruthless sociopaths primarily concerned with their own advancement. The Aaron Copland-esque qualities long held as tokens of the purest American heartland (honesty, hope, patriotism), are now gone, and what's left is a shadowy environment with oppressive features: a mechanistic, massive, de-humanized city, ruled only by self-interest.

If the musical topic representing American virtue is gone, what is the nature of the new musical portrait in *HOUSE OF CARDS*? Most intriguingly, what musical topic and imagery is now replacing the Copland-esque, Steinbeck-inspired

⁸ Whoriskey, Peter (2011) Growing wealth widens distance between lawmakers and constituents. *The Washington Post*, December 26.

farm? Although a persuasively direct musical ancestor of the background music accompanying the opening credits is hard to pinpoint, I take a cue from the KOYANISQATSI allusion created by the time lapse, and venture that the universe of HOUSE OF CARDS, both musical and ideological, leans towards a dystopian society. Along these lines, and together with the minimalist drive of Phillip Glass's KOYANISQATSI it is possible to hear echoes of Vangelis's soundtrack for BLADE RUNNER (USA/HK/GB 1982, Ridley Scott), and, extending the metaphor of HOUSE OF CARDS, a world enacting to the extreme the contrast between the haves and the have-nots. A summary of some of the main motifs in the closing credits of BLADE RUNNER—those bearing a resemblance to the soundtrack of HOUSE OF CARDS—is offered in Example 2, below.

Blade Runner Closing Credits (1982) Motifs

 ca. 112
Global Tempo

1 Synth Bass Ostinato



In 1982, it was required that such a dark fantasy as Ridley Scott's *BLADE RUNNER* belonged to the world of science fiction and the far-away future or, as in the case of *GLADIATOR* (USA 2000, Ridley Scott) to the distant past. Sadly, thirty years after *BLADE RUNNER*, it may be that the future is already here, only without the techno sounds. The success of such a dark, murderous, tragic version of *HOUSE OF CARDS*, virtually devoid of the insolent humour of the British version, paradoxically, tells us about the growing disenchantment of American society. If we are to believe that Netflix uses data mining for marketing purposes, perhaps even to redirect the development of characters and narrative lines according to the preferences of the public, then the series can really tell us about what's next for American democracy, or perhaps for democracy anywhere. Notwithstanding that fictional Frank Underwood shares multiple traits with real-life heads of state such as Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, or Jair Bolsonaro, the show represents a worrisome snapshot—back in 2013, when the show was premiered, just an omen, but by 2019 a cynical acceptance—of what citizens, even American citizens, have come to realistically expect of their own government.

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