

How Frank Underwood Paved the Way for Donald Trump: Transmedia (De-)Construction of Civil Religious Narratives in (Fictional) American Politics

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ABSTRACT: Located between Bellah's *American Civil Religion*, Bredekamp's *Image Act Theory*, and Genette's theory on narratology, this essay examines the impact *House of Cards* had on the 2016 presidential elections. Kevin Spacey's iconic character Frank Underwood was the first presidential villain, and the first one who moved beyond the series to appear at the Correspondents' Dinner in 2013. While the breaking of the *fourth wall* was not new to film, interactions with the audience on- and off-screen were fundamentally new. Furthermore, by including 'real' news anchors like Stephen Colbert or John King in the show, boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred. Also, portraits of former presidents are used to contextualize but also contrast Underwood's words and actions. This stylistic element employs many civil religious narratives which are part of the collective memory. Watching Underwood undermine those commonly known civil religious and democratic dogmas in the 'fictional reality' changes and shapes the audience's perception of the American presidency's institutional narratives. By rearranging various civil religious elements into a completely new, yet familiar picture, the fictional presidential narrative became part of the historical imagination. Thus, the insight *House of Cards* offered to a fictional Washington, D.C. with non-fictional markers enabled Donald Trump's campaign team to develop persisting media strategies for his Reality Show.¹

KEYWORDS: American Civil Religion, Donald Trump, Netflix, House of Cards, Presidency, Post-Truth Era

Introduction

Since the American Revolution, the founders and former colonizers, of the US American nation searched for a common vision of its people. This vision had to be diametrically different from British traditions. The first common US American symbols were flags proclaiming "LIBERTY" during the Revolutionary War (Fischer 129). After agreeing on a set of national symbols, the young US American nation was in need of national heroes. First and foremost, it was George Washington whose life and perceived values were mystified to an *exemplum virtutis*. "In the years of Washington's presidency yet another vision emerged: the president as a republican citizen, first among equals. He was portrayed in a plain suit of black cloth, a symbol not of

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power or majesty but of liberty, virtue, justice and republicanism” (181). As Susan Williams argues, by this point, *presidential portraits*² were fictional portraits that visualized national narratives for the public (5). Considering fictional characters and real-life politicians, the underlying fictionality of the *presidential portrait* is the most interesting fact about representative art, which should literally focus on the likeness of the portrayed person. Williams writes that fictional portraits can also function as mirrors as they expose the process of interpretation and the extent to which language can do the work of a visual sign (5). I argue that concerning *presidential portraits* this fact is important, because national narratives and traditions are communicated by and through them. Representative portraits are not only visual signs but instruments of political image-making. Without a common vision and understanding, the visual transportation of US American values would not be possible. Additionally, United States *presidential portraits*, as I understand them, contain a civil religious dimension. For the invention and the nationwide installation of the American Civil Religion (ACR), which is the quasi-religious expression of patriotism, such as the Pledge of Allegiance or the veneration of the national flag, George Washington played a crucial role (cf. Schwartz, *George Washington*). Washington’s Western Christian virtues were supported by a strong belief in God who watched over and protected America, and his firm trust in God’s wisdom, might, guidance, and help (Smith 28). In 1967, sociologist Robert N. Bellah adapted ACR to the twentieth century, acknowledging that religion, particularly the idea of God, played a constitutive role in the founding ideas of the early statesmen (“Civil Religion in America” 6). Bellah’s ACR goes beyond the common belief in God. Referring to Jean Jacques Rousseau, ACR is practised in public and expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals (“Civil Religion in America” 4). Consequently, nationhood and US American self-understanding are constructed, reinterpreted, and shaped, among other things, by verbal and visual narratives.

Therefore, *presidential portraits* establish an art historical genre, and are civil religious symbols, even icons, to whom the core values of the US American nation are inherent. As such, they are interpreted differently depending on the era and society referring to them and are often used to support visual political strategies. Even though portraits should resemble the sitter closely, *presidential portraits* as a genre are fictional portraits with a storytelling function, using the face of the absent model to implement narratives, values, and virtues to the sitter (Belting, *Faces* 120 ff.). “After the Revolution, public portraits were [...] used to commemorate national heroes and to instill Republican virtue” (Williams 19). In the twentieth century, new media and technologies reconfigured the use of *presidential portraits*. Of course, technologies like photography in the nineteenth century and industries like Hollywood in the early twentieth century discovered the value of the *presidential portrait* and the President as a cinematic topic. Thus, campaign strategists intended to support Kennedy’s second presidential election campaign with the movie *PT-109* (1963). In 1976, filmmakers first began

² In my dissertation I define presidential portraits as an independent art historical genre, hence the term appears in italics (Ley 64 ff.).

to critically discuss Washington, D.C. and its scandals in *All the President's Men*. Until the present day, this critical cinematic discourse leads to a flood of political films and (TV) series about Washington, D.C., the President, or the American State in general. One of those series was Netflix's *House of Cards*, which originally aired from 2013 until 2018, consisting of six seasons and featuring Kevin Spacey as President Francis J. Underwood. In an absolutely revolutionary manner, considering serial methods and the style of filming, as well as the accessibility on a digital streaming platform, *House of Cards* changed the genre of political series, confounding the viewers with an accurate depiction of Washington, D.C. In order to create this illusion, set decorators and showrunners used *presidential portraits* to contextualize or counteract specific scenes, knowing that at least the US American audience was aware of the values and virtues, for example, honesty, modesty, loyalty, and justice, attributed to the various US American presidents through these portraits. The steady reinterpretation and deconstruction of presidential civil religious narratives, like the honesty of Abraham Lincoln as a value of the president, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by real-life and fictional politicians, made them increasingly fragile. These already fragile narratives of the American presidency are corrupted through *House of Cards* and presented to a broad (not only) US American audience. We see parallels to Frank Underwood in real life, when Donald Trump, a person who does not live up to the values of honesty, modesty, loyalty, and justice, was elected president for the first time in 2016.

Therefore, this essay consists of four major sections: first, the *presidential portrait* as an art historical genre, second, images and visual political strategies, third, *the use of presidential portraits* in *House of Cards*, and fourth, the destruction of civil religious narratives, showing how this process contributed to Donald Trump's campaign strategy and his terms of office.

Presidential Portraits as an Art Historical Genre

What defines an art historical genre? First, there has to be a common topic. Concerning the *presidential portrait*, this common topic is the depiction of the US American president. Second, the composition of the painting has to be recognizable and repeatable. In the case of the *presidential portrait*, there are three compositional templates that have been created in the first hundred years of the United States of America. These templates derive from Gilbert Stuart's *Lansdowne Portrait* (fig. 1), Gilbert Stuart's *Athenaeum Portrait* (fig. 2), and G.P.A. Healey's *Lincoln Portrait* (fig. 3).

Gilbert Stuart's *Lansdowne Portrait* (fig. 1) still adorns Washington with all kinds of civil-religious state symbols, such as the chair with the Star-Spangled Banner, Hamilton's *Federalist Papers*, the bald eagle engraved in the table, Roman columns, and a rainbow in the background. These symbols underline Washington's civic republican values and virtues. Nevertheless, the *Lansdowne Portrait* still holds on to some motifs which derive from European representative art of royalty, such as the golden chair and table, as well as the purple-red curtain in the background. The saber Washington wears also draws from European heritage. In a civil religious context, the saber is a symbol for Washington's heroic deeds during

the Revolutionary War. In Gilbert Stuart's *Infinito*, the *Athenaeum Portrait* (fig. 2), Washington's bust is seen, in which the values attributed to him are inherent. It serves as an *exemplum virtutis* for all successors in office who orient themselves towards Washington. The *Athenaeum Portrait* is a civil religious icon. Other than symbols, icons in this context are understood religiously. While icons are known from orthodox churches, in Western Christian traditions, iconoclasm long forbade any depiction of God. "Iconoclasm initially led to a fundamental discussion between the Abrahamic religions, which flared up again during the Reformation, when Calvin in particular invoked the prohibition of images" (Bredekamp 1).³ The Old Testament's ban on images is diametrically opposed to the veneration of icons. John Adams shared this sentiment with regard to a democratic state when he said: "Democracy has no monuments. It strikes no medals. It bears the head of no man on a coin. It's very essence is iconoclastic" (319). Here, one has to acknowledge that democracy indeed cannot be depicted (cf. Heinrich). But that does not mean that civil religious narratives do not need to



Figure 1 Gilbert Stuart: *The Lansdowne Portrait*, 1796, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

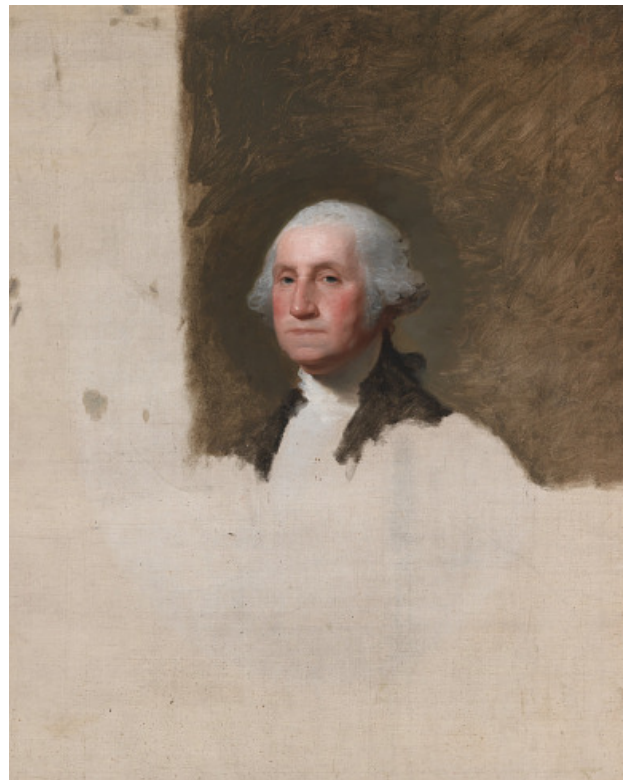


Figure 2 Gilbert Stuart: *The Athenaeum Portrait*, 1796, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

³ Bredekamp notes that image bans often appear more frequently in times of social turbulence, such as during the French, Russian or Chinese Revolutions (173). This is significant regarding ACR because the references to and the use of civil-religious visual narratives also increase in times of crisis.

be visualized in *presidential portraits*. Differentiating between democracy as an abstract term and US American narratives about democracy is, therefore, crucial for my argument that *presidential portraits* contain values and virtues that can be corrupted when set in the wrong context and consequently begin to lack any meaning. But at this point, it is obvious that being worshipped as civil religious icons underlines the fictionality of the *presidential portrait* itself, which is a construct of the painter and the client aiming to create an image of the person depicted.

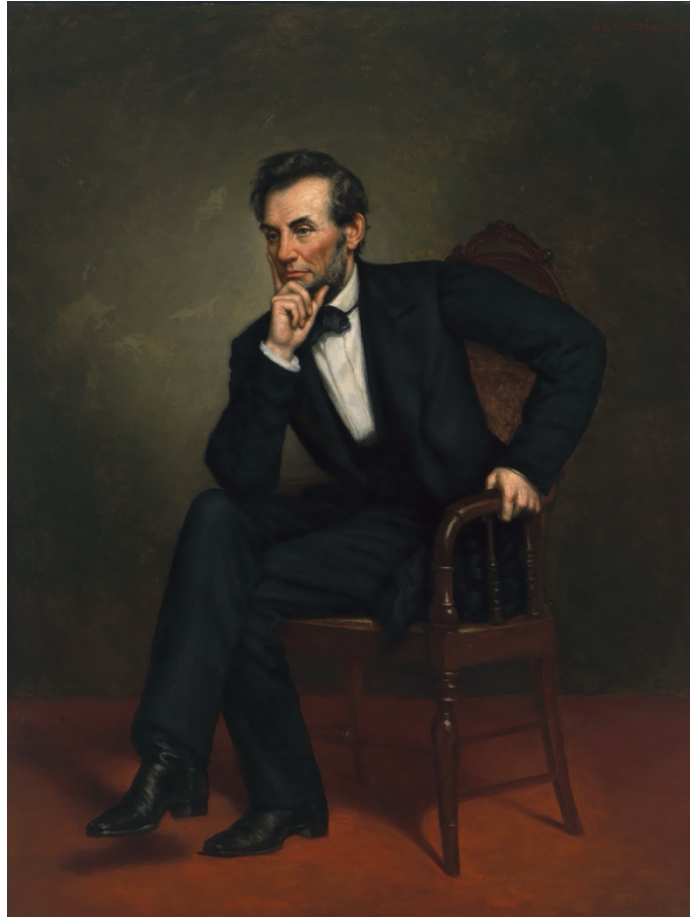


Figure 3 George Peter Alexander Healy: Abraham Lincoln, 1887, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Usually the historical person fulfills a preexisting ideal of the saint. But sometimes the relationship was reversed. If the person of the saint did not fit the traditional patterns, there was a need to formulate the ideal that the person did embody. [...] Ceremonial images were likewise replaced by new ones because the official ideal had to be without error. The images, after all, had not to be looked at but, more, believed in. Thus the ‘corrected image’ was a consequence of the ‘correct’ perception one was supposed to have of the saint. (Belting, *Likeness and Presence* 13)

In the case of the young nation of the United States, there were no republican saints to worship other than the living, such as George Washington. This is crucial for an understanding of the genre of the *presidential portrait* and its civil religious dimension. Taking Memory

Studies into account, Michael Kammen coined the terms *cultural memory* and *historical imagination* (cf. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*; *Meadows of Memory*). While *cultural memory* includes memories of a cultural group, *historical imagination* describes attributions and narratives of this cultural group for an (actual) historical event. The United States, at the time of the Early Republic, had only a brief national cultural history. As a consequence, early national US American narratives derive from making myth into history (Spalding and Garrity ix). Hence, national narratives and symbols can emerge and survive through shared experiences. Some narratives reach back to the Revolutionary War, while others were constructed contemporarily to promote a certain, mostly political, agenda, e.g. during World War I or after 9/11. The latter are based on extraordinary commonly shared emotions of a national public. They evoke national unity and national identity. Furthermore, such constructed national narratives and icons often emerge from extreme situations or catastrophes. “The collective suffering, sadness, and anger growing out of social disruptions provide the raw materials for the re-creation of society as ‘moral community’” (Neal 20). The Civil War, the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, or 9/11 are examples of experienced national trauma. In contrast to these negatively remembered events, the American Revolution can be seen as a positive national event. Without diving too deep into history, it was an act of violence but also of liberation from the British Empire. The desire for a sense of community in a young nation creates national myths (Paul 27). In retrospect and for the emerging culture of memory, it is more important to commemorate the emotions and values evoked by the event than to have a historical reproduction of the events. Bellah describes the US American national myth as follows:

America's myth of origin is a strategic point of departure because the comparative study of religion has found that where a people conceive itself to have started reveals much about its most basic self-conceptions. At first glance the problem of origin in America seems a relatively simple one. Unlike most historic peoples, America as a nation began on a definite date, July 4th, 1776. Thus, in analyzing America's myth of origin, close attention must be paid to the mythic significance of the Declaration of Independence, which is considerable. (*The Broken Covenant* 3)

Etymologically, myth comes from the Greek *mýthos*, meaning fable, legend, or story. In the genesis of national narratives, heroes and legends are indispensable: “The creation of heroic and legendary figures to symbolize the aspirations of the nation provided sources of inspiration for future generations” (Neal 21). Thus, myths also have enormous significance in Bellah's theory. Like Rousseau and Durkheim, he ties them in with the Western Christian tradition. The common belief in something bigger arises only from shared rituals, a fact that, as Bellah notes, is often dismissed as nothing (“Civil Religion in America” 3). Bellah does not only address private rituals, but also state rituals. His theory follows the basic assumption that religion is basically something private, but in combination with the state element, it generates closeness between the institutions of the state and the citizen:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American Civil Religion. (“Civil Religion in America” 4)

Understanding the common set of civil-religious rituals and beliefs described by Bellah, and the artifacts, icons, and symbols derived from them, is indispensable in order to understand the *presidential portrait* as an independent art historical genre, as well as its visual impact. Other civil religious artifacts are texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, but also visual symbols such as the Star-Spangled Banner, the presidential seal, or architectural monuments such as Mount Rushmore, as well as national holidays such as Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, or the 4th of July, and state rituals such as the inauguration ceremony.

As a civil religious icon, in its artistic reduction as a form of the *non-finito*, the *Athenaeum Portrait* (fig. 2) functions as a plain canvas on which viewers can inscribe each narrative about Washington they find fitting. It is a symbolically reduced state portraiture. Some viewers identify with Washington’s modesty, being shown without any pompous decoration, while others see the portrait as representing his justice towards the citizens. It depends on each viewers’ background. Politically, this means that the depicted president alone symbolizes and embodies US American values and virtues. At the same time, the depicted president fits the office of the American Presidency by exercising these values and virtues in daily life. Furthermore, Aleida Assmann describes the emergence of a cultural memory as a motivation to create a national memory for a new collective of the nation to publicly immortalize its history and artistic achievements in the form of sacred icons (30). Understanding *presidential portraits* as such icons explains their importance for ACR.

As mentioned above, G.P.A. Healey’s *Abraham Lincoln* portrait (fig. 3) serves as and establishes the last compositional template of the *presidential portrait*. The fact that Healey’s portrait was painted about a hundred years after Stuart’s famous George Washington paintings shows the visual consistency from the Revolutionary War until the Civil War. After the Civil War, the formerly deeply disrupted but at the same time freshly united nation was in need of new united (visual) narratives. Many civil religious narratives are constructed around Abraham Lincoln, from his origin to his martyrdom. He was known as the *common man* and his myth established the *American Dream* (cf. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln*). He was known as the *Savior of the Union* and *Honest Abe*. Furthermore, he was the first US American president to be assassinated, which made him the first martyr of ACR. In his portrait of Lincoln, Healey combines the compositional templates of the *Lansdowne* and the *Athenaeum Portrait*. Lincoln is shown sitting on a wooden chair similar to the golden chair in the *Lansdowne Portrait*. In contrast to Stuart’s painting, Lincoln is not accompanied by any civil religious artefacts or

symbols. This draws visual similarities to the *Athenaeum Portrait*. Like Washington, Lincoln also established further narratives of an honest president and the Great Uniter. This is the reason why his depiction is reduced to a pensive modest Lincoln, so that, like the *Athenaeum Portrait*, viewers can interpret the *Lincoln Portrait* in various ways depending on the context of its veneration. Consequently, Washington and Lincoln's iconic depictions contributed to their apotheosis as saints of ACR.

Until today, all but two *presidential portraits*, those of John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama, stick to one of the three compositional templates above, thereby referencing their predecessors. In the following section I will describe how *presidential portraits* are used in and by the media, and what impact this use has on their narratives' public perception.

Images and Visual Political Strategies

Presidential portraits, especially as art in the White House, are used in political strategic communication to reference the values of former presidents. Matt Stevens and Larry Buchanan write the following in the *New York Times*: "The paintings and the sculptures that are displayed in the Oval Office represent the choices of each American president – subtle and not so subtle signals every administration sends about its values and view of history" (9). Hence, the art in the *Oval Office* is more than only decorative. By displaying certain predecessors, a president informs the public about his private and political agenda. As described above, these decorative choices are supposed to communicate that the sitting president meets the values and virtues of the predecessors he references. Additionally, in the public's perception, his character and actions must, to a certain degree, be congruent with the narratives referenced in these paintings to be credible. Bellah emphasizes this when he argues how important common rituals, whether private or public, are for civil religious coexistence. With reference to the construction of a nation, it was possible to integrate traditional Western Christian images into ACR. As described above, due to the form of representation of the icon, which was already anchored in the Christian faith, the acceptance of the population for this civil religious element was high. Horst Bredekamp writes in his *Image Act Theory* about the power of the image:

Images do not derive from reality. They are, rather, a form of its condition. Images, through their own potency, empower those enlightened observers who fully recognize this quality. Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action related to perception. This is the quintessence of the image act. (283)

First, the communication between an image and its recipients is always reciprocal; second, Bredekamp, too, identifies images as fictional to a certain degree. The term 'image' has to be understood in a broader context than the *presidential portrait*, since an image does not necessarily have to have a physical form of existence. Hence, representative images of US political leadership culture are constructed and have the function of transporting civil religious narratives. With regard to *presidential portraits*, civil religious symbolism varies from overt in

the *Lansdowne Portrait* to low-threshold in Aaron Shikler's *Kennedy Portrait*.⁴ Their visual legibility depends on the cultural memory of each recipient and is crucial for the understanding of *presidential portraits* as political communicators. Thomas Knieper and Marion Müller note that political communication is no longer logo-centered, but primarily icon-centered (7), which makes decoding skills in visual political communication necessary.

As noted above, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *presidential portraits* of John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama stand out from traditional compositions. Kennedy's painting was commissioned by his wife, Jacqueline, who helped to establish his myth. Painter Aaron Shikler commented on the portrait: "I wanted to let future generations know the man for what he was, a metaphor of America at a crossroads, not just handsome Jack" (Shikler quoted in Quinn B3). Pop culture and the functionality of *presidential portraits* unite under the Kennedy-Myth. The Kennedy-Myth consists of his youth, his assassination, and finally his connection to the mystic *Camelot*, added posthumously by his wife. Due to his popularity, Kennedy and his strategic team were aware of the media and managed to use it to advance their political goals. They took advantage of print media, e.g. *Life Magazine*, as well as *Hollywood* and the film industry, producing *PT-109* as part of their election campaign strategy. The movie revolves around Kennedy's heroic deeds during World War II, picturing him as an American Hero. However, before this strategy could catch on, he was assassinated, strengthening his icon status among his fellow American presidents. Kennedy's presidency marks a turning point in presidential depiction and media use from traditional and formalized to democratic and media-controlled. I call this phenomenon the third visual founding of the United States (Ley 115 ff.). It is defined by a democratization of the presidential image and *presidential portraits*, meaning that from Kennedy's presidency on, besides politicians and US American politics, the free press, media, and other individuals are capable of commenting on, producing, or acquiring them. However, this era of democratization also marked the beginning of the deconstruction and destruction of civil religious narratives, which were increasingly deconstructed from the middle of the twentieth century on. Hence, in this era of the third visual founding, the population can independently adapt, recite, and, above all, produce the image and institution of the presidency and the president. This defines the moment when the phenomenon of prosuming, in which the boundaries between communicators and recipients become blurred and prosumers emerge who are both audience and producers of the content produced (Wiedel et al. 157), becomes relevant. It is a 'third visual founding' because the civil religious artifacts of the founding, the Declaration of Independence, as well as the Gettysburg Address for the second founding, are textual and shape the cultures of remembrance differently. For example, the American Revolution is remembered by celebrating the 4th of July. Furthermore, some parts of the Lincoln presidency and Lincoln's honest image are often

⁴ Aaron Shikler: *John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Official White House Portrait), 1970, Painting, Oil on Canvas, © White House Historical Association/White House Collection, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=5379FF5AD38A4852%20BD66F9A0E7482567> (Last accessed September 30, 2025).

referenced and remembered either textually or visually, to underline the credibility of a statement or an event.

Presidential portraits are deconstructed and newly arranged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Often, completely new images emerge from the process of the democratization of the image, ignoring traditional narratives of the past on purpose. Presently, according to the *Design Protection Act of 1976*, all work of the United States government is in the public domain (*Design Protection Act*). On the one hand, these are texts produced by the government, but on the other hand, they also include visual artefacts like paintings or photographs. The permission to use them freely outside of the governmental, political context enables creativity, but also leads presidential images and narratives to become more fragile and consists of separate components rather than forming a coherent whole.

The democratization of presidential images and *presidential portraits* culminates in OBAMAMANIA. The most prominent example of this is Ron English' *Abraham Obama*, a print which shows the faces of Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama morphed into each other.⁵ This is an example of the deconstruction of visual presidential narratives, identifying Lincoln's character traits in Obama, and thereby showing the latter's fitness for the office. In addition, Obama's election campaign and his administration relied on social media to win the election. Hence, the way of (visual) political storytelling changed drastically. "With the embracing of the social networking service Flickr as a means of presenting and dissemination presidential photography, the Obama administration has fundamentally altered the use of official photographs and the ways how official photos are mediated and remediated" (Bernhardt 168). Obama's team added a dimension of commercialization to the democratization of the image. Subsequently, during his time in office, Obama returned to an old tradition of the 'court painter' by choosing Pete Souza as his presidential photographer, allowing the American people daily insights to the White House via social media. Under the acronym POTUS, the American president ultimately became part of pop culture in an unprecedented way.

Barack Obama's official White House portrait was painted by Robert McCurdy and was unveiled on September 07, 2022.⁶ Like Kennedy's portrait, it is not based on traditional compositional templates. This is understandable, since Obama repeatedly referred verbally and visually to Kennedy and Lincoln during his terms in office, as well as during the election campaigns. Commenting on his work in an interview with the White House Historical Association, the artist said:

⁵ Ron English: *Abraham Obama*, 2008, print on paper, posted on *Instagram* January 29, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/ronenglish/>, (Accessed March 31, 2025)

⁶ Robert McCurdy: *Barack Obama*, 2018, Painting, Oil on Canvas, © Bruce White for the White House Historical Association, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/fotoware?id=A1BBA736A8604D72%2081588B0229CA727F>; here, it is to add, that there are always two *presidential portraits* of one president, one *Official White House Portrait* commissioned by the White House Historical Association and one *Presidential Portrait* commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery. In the case of Barack Obama, the latter was painted by Kehinde Wiley, who used the compositional template of the Healey portrait.

They have plain white backgrounds, nobody gestures, there are no props, because we're not here to tell the story of the person that's sitting for them. We're here to create an encounter between the viewer and the sitter. The viewer will bring their emotional and historical package to that moment, and it will be different for every single one. (McCurdy cited in Lakritz)

This statement refers to the image-viewer-relationship and points to the enormous importance of visual legibility. McCurdy's statement also links with Bredekamp's *Image Act Theory*. The knowledge and values of each recipient of a *presidential portrait* influence the viewing experience. According to Kammen's *cultural memory*, for US citizens a common knowledge about the American presidents and their narratives can be assumed. Decoding visual messages and narratives depends on the recipient's background and socialization. Taking cultural memory and historical imagination into account, it is therefore interesting to use *presidential portraits* in media productions and presidential campaigns. While there is an intended message by the producer, consumers can interpret scenes and plots differently. Therefore, it is not surprising that while politicians use Hollywood for their purposes, Hollywood also engages in politics, especially delving into the 'myth and secrecy' of the White House. So, the last step of the democratization of presidential images and *presidential portraits* can be understood as their fictionalization in Hollywood movies and TV series.

The link between Hollywood and the presidency is apparent in Ronald Reagan's successful election. While Kennedy used Hollywood as part of his election campaign strategies, Reagan, as a Hollywood celebrity before his political career, brought the industry and its glamour to the White House, contributing to a completely different cinematic representation with a completely different audience. As the *Great Communicator*, he also visually mediates between the institution of the Presidency and the world of acting, being known for his acting on screen and his work as a politician in real life. This ambivalence opened up an opportunity for a showman politician. One could argue that from his presidency onwards, both image-making and the mere appearance of the incumbent's suitability to the presidency became paramount. As a consequence, traditional values of ACR faded into the background in the context of presidential depiction until Barack Obama awakened them again. After the Cold War, due to a lack of steady presidential civil religious visual representations, some presidential core values faded into obscurity, making way for new deconstructed and rearranged narratives.

In Obama's visual rhetoric, ACR experienced a resurrection, and for a moment regained its unifying function. Western Christian rhetoric, such as love, faith, and hope, is present in his visual communication, integrated into his election campaign as central elements. Obama consistently pursued this approach in his visual campaign strategy and was successfully portrayed as completely congruent with the narrative of the US presidency.

American Presidential Portraits in Netflix's *House of Cards*

But what happens when the congruence between narrative and incumbent is suddenly missing? And can we rely on Bellah's ACR in a time of trial for democracy? "What we have,

then from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” (Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* 46). Just as the incumbents of the present refer to their predecessors, fictional movie or TV productions also use *presidential portraits* to contextualize scenes or to counteract the plot of the show. This means that the context or topic of a scene does not fit its visual depiction, setting, and decoration. As explained above, visual political strategies traditionally exploited civil religious narratives. In those strategies, visual narratives were staged and reinterpreted to fit and support the candidate’s political message. Through the deconstruction of individual civil religious narratives and their new arrangement, the values inherent in the narrative are partially lost, so that the narratives themselves become more fragile. Through their use in (social) media and the changed media consumption, I argue that the fragile civil religious values are finally partially destroyed not only in fictional shows but also in real life. Last but not least, a changed general value system in the post-truth era contributes to this. We could observe the destruction of civil religious values during the 2016 and 2024 election campaigns as an ongoing phenomenon, leading to an American president who does not meet the civil religious values and expectations of the American presidency. So, it is important to take a look at the Netflix show which preceded the first presidency of Donald Trump.

Netflix’s *House of Cards* aired originally from 2013 until 2018, consisting of 73 episodes called chapters, on the streaming platform Netflix. Since the series aired on a streaming platform and all episodes of each season were released at the same time, it was one of the first shows available to binge-watch. It was the first show produced by Netflix and a huge success for the platform. While the series draws from some cinematic decisions of the British BBC TV series *House of Cards* (1990), Netflix’s *House of Cards* is neither based on the British TV series nor on the British novel. Netflix’s *House of Cards* features the first presidential villain on screen. Political scandals like *Watergate* have been depicted on screen before, but no filmmaker aimed to characterize Nixon as the ‘hero’ in such productions. This is different with *House of Cards*. In the series *House of Cards*, Kevin Spacey plays the more or less charismatic Machiavellian politician, Frank Underwood, who cleverly conspires from his position in the Senate to eventually be elected President of the United States of America. While doing so, Underwood takes advantage of and exploits the values of ACR, e.g. playing the honest and loyal friend to President Walker, whom he later tries to depose. With regard to real-life Washington, D.C., the fictional political Washington, D.C., is shown as the corrupt swamp Ronald Reagan once intended to drain. In the series, it seems as if anybody righteous and just is either killed (by Frank Underwood) or intimidated into leaving the political stage. A striking cinematic element of the series is the breaking of the fourth wall. In these moments of metalepsis, to use Gerard Genette term (Genette 152), Underwood crosses the boundaries of his dimension, and often acts in scenes in which action or dialogue in the background runs counter to what he is saying. In this way, the audience becomes an accomplice to his machinations.

The character Frank Underwood thus succeeds in transcending his fictional reality and joining the real world. It is the producers of the series, as well as real press and politics, that manifest Underwood in our reality. The concept of fictional reality can be explained when viewed in the context of the post-truth era. According to Ralph Keyes, deception has always been an element of entertainment that only influences our values with the ubiquity of media, such as binge-watching or social media (Keyes 176). Thomas Gibson further speaks about post-truth politics:

Post-truth politics refer to the specific political and rhetorical strategies that emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims, a dynamic amplified (but not created) by an emergent and participatory digital media ecology. (3170)

Because *presidential portraits* are fictional in their visual political function, they sometimes lose their meaning in the post-truth era media circus. Here, Olaf Hoffjann proposes a game-theoretical approach that describes how political communication is increasingly being pursued and perceived as a game, in which entertainment is more important than the binding nature of the stagings and statements (208). What began with John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan during the 'visual third founding' now ends with the destruction of visual civil religious narratives in the fictional reality. This can be seen in *House of Cards*, when President Underwood acts in the White House and as president of the United States of America in ways that are diametrically opposed to his predecessors. The social media use of the White House was new and differed from previous text-based communication. Additionally, the American people got used to a certain ongoing entertainment factor from political Washington. Taking into account American cultural memory, watching a series like *House of Cards*, which aims to give an insight to 'real' political Washington, D.C. by using a detailed setting, real life news anchors from CNN and bringing Kevin Spacey in his role as Frank Underwood to real life events like the Correspondents' Dinner, makes it easy to conflate the fictional reality of the series with the real world. Furthermore, Donald Trump appeared to resemble some of Frank Underwood's dishonest and dark character traits during the 2016 presidential election campaign. He made a show for the voters, entertaining them, ignoring any criticism, and only talking about political issues where he could determine the narrative. Hoffjann states that the entertainment factor of politics is more important than any political statement, meaning that not the candidate with the best fit and values wins the election, but the one who makes the best show (208). To reach this point in American democracy, its values and civil religious narratives in their continuous reinterpretation had not only to have been deconstructed, but in the age of social media, completely destroyed. This devaluation was supported by *House of Cards*.

The *presidential portrait* is of particular importance because *House of Cards* repeatedly features scenes in front of such portraits of former presidents in which the plot runs completely contrary to the well-known values of the former presidents depicted in them.

Chapter 21 follows a conversation between President Walker and his vice-president, Frank Underwood. In the background, we can see Charles Wilson Peale's Washington painting. Frank Underwood stands in front of the painting, while George Washington hovers over him like a civil religious shadow. Underwood does not behave righteously and justly, values which are attributed to George Washington. In chapter 23, Underwood lies in the presence of *Honest Abe*. He gives his word of honor as he turns his back on President Walker and turns to the audience. A moment of simultaneous existence on several narrative levels, being the plot of the scene and the direct communication between Underwood and the audience. During his hypocritical promise to protect Walker in case of an emergency, Underwood is framed to the right by the bust of Abraham Lincoln, as a symbol for Lincoln's perceived honesty, and to the left by President Walker, as well as the *Flag of the President of the United States*. For the viewers, it is once again evident that Frank Underwood does not meet the values of ACR or the requirements of the institution of the presidency. The values of the American presidency are clarified in the oath of office, in which every US president swears: "I will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States".⁷ While former presidents have not always acted according to the office's Washingtonian values, Underwood exclusively serves his own goals and only protects the Constitution if it fits his plans. Gaining and retaining power drive his actions, no matter the costs. In addition to the mostly successful manipulation, Underwood uses instruments of power that contradict the traditions and values of ACR, like honesty, modesty, and righteousness. Emmanuel Taieb writes: "Power resides mainly in its primitive forms: intimidation, insistent gazes, provocation, and ultimately physical violence. Its 'political' and courtly dimension, that is, its peaceful symbolic side, is finally nothing more than window dressing" (Taieb 95). The audience, as accomplice, observes Underwood threaten, betray, and murder his rivals. While the public revelation of Bill Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky was almost unbearable for the US presidency as an institution in the 1990s, a fictional, murderous, power-hungry president such as Frank Underwood should never be president in real life. *House of Cards* picks up on and presents changing conceptions of the Presidency already present within the electorate. People had already lost trust in politics and the civil religious figure of the President, and the show takes this distrust and fictionalizes it. In addition, *House of Cards* made connections to the real world to make the fictional reality more reliable and support its illusion of being real in fact.

So, in *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood and Ronald Reagan meet as politicians, but in the perception of the audience, Kevin Spacey and Ronald Reagan can also be perceived as actors. For the plot of the series, Reagan's presidential portrait serves as a reference to the Cold War and the reservations that still exist between the former opponent nations. After Underwood is sworn in as President of the United States, he invites Russian President Victor Petrov to the

⁷ <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/oath-of-office.htm>, last accessed July 27, 2025

White House. This reveals entanglements between fictional reality and the real world. Regarding reality in film, Constantine Nakassis states that

realist films do indeed respect the being of the filmic image [...] because what it means to be connected to the real is always a political issue, because the politics of and for the image is (the basis of) its being. [...] [A]ll realisms participate in an ontological politics that they bear in the filmic and cinematic forms they manifest. (193)

The intended realism in Chapter 29 culminates in the speeches of President Underwood and President Petrov. While Underwood quotes Alexis de Tocqueville, Petrov is reminiscent of Gorbachev.

UNDERWOOD: We'd like to welcome all of you as we host President Petrov in this historic state visit. A century ago, a century and a half ago, de Tocqueville wrote in regards to America and Russia, the following: 'Their point of departure and their paths diverse, nevertheless, each seems called by some secret desire of Providence, to one day hold in their hands the destinies of half the world.' Well, I'd like to amend that tonight and say, not just half of the world, the entire world looks to us for leadership. So, to President Petrov, and all of the great things that our great nations will do together.

PETROV: (speaks Russian and translates afterwards) Which is Russian for, 'Never trust the French.' And thank you to the president and the First Lady for your grace and hospitality. Now, a little more recently than de Tocqueville, about, uh, 30 years ago, Mikhail Gorbachev came to this very house and talked about an end to our 'winter of discontent.' I think it's safe to say that that winter seems far gone now. And here, on this beautiful May evening, welcome a 'spring of enchantment.' Now we all know which of you brings the enchantment to the table. To you, Mrs. Underwood. (he pauses) And, of course, your lesser half.

Both presidents invoke the hegemonic position of America and Russia. Petrov refers to the end of the Cold War. Ronald Reagan gave his famous statement on June 12, 1987, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" This was emphasized when he signed the INF Treaty on nuclear disarmament together with Mikhail Gorbachev in December of the same year (Reagan). In this respect, the historical evidence that *House of Cards* provides at this point is correct. Different, but no less appropriate, is the quote about the ending winter of discontent. If Gorbachev actually chose these words in December 1987, he used Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The piece, whose relationship to *House of Cards* and especially to Kevin Spacey is one of a kind, since Kevin Spacey played Richard III at the *Old Vic's Theatre* in London in 2011, begins with this very line: "Now the winter of our discontent, glorious summer was through the sun of York" (Shakespeare).

In the *House of Cards*, *presidential portraits* are not only used for contextualization or counteracting purposes, but they are also part of a striking marketing coup, creating Frank

Underwood's very own presidential portrait.⁸ A *presidential portrait* is usually commissioned after a US president leaves office. In contrast to other appearances of fictional characters that transcend the boundaries of fictional reality, the revelation of Underwood's *presidential portrait* is not addressed in the series (Catlin). It was a teaser for the third season of *House of Cards* in 2016. The visual power emanating from the painting, which was exhibited between real US presidents as a museal artefact in physical form, is completely different from binge-watching the series in one's own home and the physical act of viewing a painting is strikingly different from consuming a TV series because one had to go to the museum to see it and because it manifests the fictional person of Frank Underwood in the real world. The *presidential portrait* of Frank Underwood, unveiled on February 22, 2016, was exhibited on the ground floor of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution beginning on February 24, 2016 (National Portrait Gallery). Thus, Underwood's *presidential portrait* was located in the National Portrait Gallery in the contemporary collection on the first floor, but not in the "America's Presidents" section, which is located on the upper floor.⁹ The unveiling of the presidential portrait was a marketing ploy that was intended to promote the third season of the series. Between the seasons, a YouTube video was released that discusses the unveiling and a speech associated with it (*Presidential Portrait Unveiling*). The *presidential portrait* of Frank Underwood, painted by Jonathan Yeo, is an artifact that does not exist in fictional reality but in the real world. Precisely for this reason, the viewers are committed to this *presidential portrait* to impose the same formal canonical requirements as those of 'real' US presidents. The commissioned artist Jonathan Yeo also wanted to meet these requirements: "There's a formality of the genuine official portrait, [...] the more loose, lateral brush strokes in it, to suggest a digital image flickering on a screen, to suggest what this show has meant in terms of how we consume the media" (Yeo cited in Catlin).

Jonathan Yeo uses the compositional template of the Healey portrait. The painting shows Francis J. Underwood sitting at the desk of the *Oval Office*. In the background, to the right of President Underwood, you can see the American flag. His right arm is bent and rests on the table with a clenched fist. The painting is held in shades of grey, blue, and red. The ductus is strong, coarse, and sometimes irregular. The viewers look up to President Underwood, and he consequently looks down to the viewers according to his role. It is striking that in the distortion of perspective, Underwood's left foot appears oversized. A compositional decision that is directly related to the positioning of the painting in the exhibition. Yeo notes, "When hung, the portrait is intended to look down at the viewer, to emphasize the fearsomeness of the ruthless politician portrayed, such that with the shoe sticking prominently forward from his crossed legs" (Yeo quoted in Catlin). Kevin Spacey commented on the positioning of the

⁸ Jonathan Yeo: Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), oil on canvas, 2016, Smithsonian Institute, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., © Jonathan Yeo, <https://www.jonathanyeo.com/kevin> (Last accessed on September 30, 2025).

⁹ Floor Map National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum https://npg.si.edu/sites/default/files/saam-npg_map_2018-06-12_accessible.pdf (Accessed on January 23, 2025).

painting as follows: “I think, when it is hung at the right height, you may wonder if I’m going to kick you in the face, which seems appropriate for this particular character” (Spacey quoted in Catlin).

While the *presidential portrait* as a genre has been noted to draw from an inherent civil-religious canon of symbols, traditions, and values, the portrait of Underwood stands out negatively by showing him trampling on the population, confronting them with an intimidating expression and a clenched fist. This portrait fits the character but cannot hold up in the civil religious values of the genre and the appreciation of the presidency as an institution. However, this also highlights the fact that *House of Cards* challenges traditional civil religious values. Jonathan Yeo uses a traditional compositional template of the *presidential portrait*. He also uses the American flag as a civil religious symbol. As in the *Lansdowne* portrait, the desk is a symbol of the executive branch as an interplay between the government and administration of the republic after the Revolutionary War. The portrait of Underwood is not the first painting in the National Portrait Gallery to show an actor in his role, as Catlin notes:

At the Portrait Gallery, it goes back to an 1830 painting of the actor Ira Aldridge as Othello by Henry Perronet Briggs and also includes a *Time Magazine* cover photo of Robin Williams as Mork from 1979 and a 1971 painting of Ethel Merman as Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun* by Rosemarie Sloat that the actress commissioned but donated to the museum. (Catlin)

Despite these traditions of portraying actors in their roles, Frank Underwood is a role with a distinctive meaning, due to his status as a fictional president, which makes the portrait’s presence in the National Portrait Gallery unique. A contemporary historical contextualization also shows the relevance of civil religion. Revealed and promoted during the 2016 US presidential election campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the fictional character of Frank Underwood appears as a real-life rival to the two candidates. Spacey, who appeared for the unveiling of his character’s *presidential portrait* in his role as Frank Underwood, said: “I’m pleased that the Smithsonian continues to prove itself as a worthwhile institution. I’m one step closer to convincing the rest of the country that I am the president” (Spacey quoted in National Portrait Gallery). This statement contributes to the blending of fact and fiction in *House of Cards*. I argue that the decision enabled real politicians to act more ruthlessly, like Underwood, since the audience has been exposed to his deceitful behavior in the series, accepting more deceit in real life. By infiltrating the real world, those who have watched *House of Cards* have been at the same time sensitized and desensitized to political strategies such as Donald Trump’s. Some of the desensitized viewers accept dishonest politicians more, and the values of *Honest Abe* fade when speaking about fake news and altering facts.

Deconstruction and Destruction of Civil Religious Narratives

In the title of this essay, I state that *House of Cards* paved the way for Donald Trump’s first presidency. But how exactly could Donald Trump and his campaign team succeed? First of all,

the Trump campaign used the media, especially *Twitter*, and his strategy team made ample use of various narratives and election slogans of previous presidents, e.g. “the media as the enemy” as Nixon stated or “Make America Great Again” originally used by Ronald Reagan in 1980. Hence, the essence of the Trump election campaign in 2016 was the construction of a presidential narrative consisting of loosely connected fragments of well-known presidential narratives. Recurring on *House of Cards*, Marc Ahrenhövel describes para-politics in fictional series. This series motivates the audience to para-political actions as well as to draw the conclusion that the series shows an authentic image of politics (17). The producers of *House of Cards* aimed for this para-political motif by inviting Steve Bannon, media specialist and former strategist of Donald Trump, as a consultant to the series¹⁰. This entanglement shows the mere fictionality of Donald Trump’s presidential self-understanding as a showman. Therefore, the Trump campaign team made use of the blurry lines between fact and fiction in a way that is similar to *House of Cards*, using strategies, images, and storylines that parallel those that viewers had already seen in the show.

The fictionality of the presidency concerning staging and storytelling and the visual communication between the US president and the American population, as well as the abuse of the media, peaked during Trump’s first presidency. Primarily using visual communication, Donald Trump and his staff are symptoms of the destruction of civil-religious narratives. “Trump is a Character on TV” was the headline of the *New York Times* on September 6, 2019 (Poniewozik). Comparing Frank Underwood’s to Donald Trump’s art of policy making, the boundaries between fact and fiction are even more blurred in the case of Trump than in the case of Frank Underwood. Known from the reality TV show *The Apprentice*, Trump plays his role as US president, providing the best show for his audience. Crossing boundaries for a fictional character like Frank Underwood is a cinematic device. The audience, as well as the actor playing the role of Frank Underwood, is (self-)aware of the fictionality and the fictional reality. This could be observed when Kevin Spacey attended the *White House Correspondents’ Dinner 2013* in the role of Frank Underwood and played in a spoof for then-President Obama, and during the unveiling of the *presidential portrait* of President Underwood, as analyzed above. In addition, *House of Cards* invited real-life news anchors like Stephen Colbert (“The Colbert Report”, Chapter 27), John King (“CNN”, Chapter 2, 37, 49), and Dana Bash (“CNN”, Chapter 28) to the show, enhancing the impression of authenticity of the series’ fictional Washington. Trump, on the other hand, is using fiction and claiming it as fact. Thus, it seems as if Donald Trump and his team are creating and crafting their own fictional reality, in which he involves his supporters. Influenced by the media, Trump moved into the White House, “not as an actor like Reagan once was, but as someone for whom there was no difference between role and reality” (Bierling 62). Donald Trump, who was familiar with the concept of reality TV

¹⁰ <https://allanishac.medium.com/bannon-conway-leaving-trump-white-house-to-work-on-house-of-cards-c8ef0d218405>, last accessed July 28, 2025; <https://www.mediamatters.org/steve-bannon/steve-bannon-urges-rep-jim-banks-be-ruthless-kevin-spaceys-character-house-cards>, last accessed July 28, 2025

from hosting and producing *The Apprentice*, conceived his presidency like a reality show. “In reality TV—at least competition reality shows like ‘The Apprentice’—you do not attempt to understand other people, except as obstacles or objects. To try to imagine what it is like to be a person other than yourself (what, in ordinary, off-camera life, we call ‘empathy’) is a liability” (Poniewozik). This explains the ongoing entertainment that Trump tried to provide to his voters during his election campaign, to which they became used to. In addition, Trump did not rely on traditional media but used social media, foremost *Twitter* (now *X*), to communicate. The only traditional broadcasting network he would trust was and still is *Fox News*, since they promote him, his values, and ideals. But especially his use of *Twitter* as the most direct way to communicate with the public or to comment on certain posts gave the impression of real-time participative politics for the American people, even if it was just Donald Trump’s reality show. As a result, Donald Trump’s concept of the presidency as a reality show undermined civil religious values, shook them to their foundations, destroyed them almost completely, and then filled them with new, right-wing populist, nationalist content. However, Trump has twice achieved success with his national and global resonance and the iconicity that arises from it. David L. Altheide writes:

Trump has become a meme in his own right, a cultural symbol of discord and membership – you are for him or against him – regardless of the message. Unlike other presidents, who had to rely on the news media for initial statements, he has hung on to his tweetable phone to send daily tweets to faithful followers, including the news media. (137)

This is one of the reasons for the destruction of civil religious narratives, some of which are now devoid of any meaning. Donald Trump’s presidency is a radical break with the image of the US president as “both a physical and metaphysical identification figure” (Makeschin 22). As mentioned above, Donald Trump’s direct communication, his branding of the media as fake and his accusations against established politics won the votes of many dissatisfied Americans. Following Donald Trump’s narrative as misunderstood and his will to “put America first”, they could identify with Donald Trump, as they were dissatisfied with the politics of the Obama administration. In him, they should see a citizen just like them, not a politician, but someone with enough money and media influence to finally “drain the swamp” in Washington. Those who voted for Trump were not exclusively white men, but also white women and in the 2016 election also a large group of Hispanics (Pew Research Center 11). What unites Donald Trump’s voters from the 2016 election is their educational background, because most of these voters, regardless of their race or gender, had no college-level education (11). Those were more open to Trump’s arguments and strategies, believing in him to better their lives after being elected. That does not mean that there had been only few educated voters who voted for Trump. The American people’s general disappointment in politics, combined with protagonists like Frank Underwood as an expression of Americans’ dissatisfaction through fictional realities, ushered in an era of entertainment and disinformation. Thus, Donald Trump remains a figure of identification for a group of dissatisfied Americans who feel called upon to

behave destructively in their Trumpmania through images and speeches. This leaves us with only the shell of civil religious narratives that are supposed to serve national unity and outstanding moral values. The destructive nature inherent in Donald Trump's civil religious narrative overshadows the nostalgic idea of a united state that each president sought to restore.

Intentionally or coincidentally, in terms of visual culture, traditional civil religious narratives are used in *House of Cards* to contextualize the scene and /or counteract the plot. The latter means that the visual setting and decorations transport a different message than the plot of the series. The series also presents the changed relationship between journalism and politics in the age of Twitter (Boutet 85). *House of Cards*, in this context, picked up on changes in American politics – especially in the right-leaning camp – and highlighted them in fictional reality before they became undeniable in national politics through Trump's politics. Political interactions, situations, and strategies discussed in the series are visually engraved in the viewers' minds. In terms of Memory Studies, historical imagination must be considered (cf. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*; *Meadows of Memory*). The image created and seen in the fictional reality leads to a supposed memory. One of these moments in which one finds oneself in a *déjà vu* of fictional reality was the G20 summit in 2017, when Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin met. Captured by the Netflix cameras, such a moment had already been seen when Frank Underwood and Victor Petrov met at the White House. In chapter 29 of *House of Cards*, both presidents meet after Underwood's inauguration. They argue over sending troops to Israel. Petrov wants the entire European missile defense gone in return for sending Russian troops to Israel. Even when Frank presents a compromise, Petrov still declines, so Frank ends the deal (*Chapter 29*). Once again, the manipulative potential of the (de-)contextualization of images becomes apparent. It is not unusual for the Russian and US heads of state to meet. The media reception of this moment in relation to *House of Cards* shows the function of fictional reality also through the mainstream media in the real world. While the static cameras captured the moment in photographs that give the impression that Putin, like his series counterpart Petrov, refused to shake hands with the US president, video footage shows that Putin and Trump shook hands (*Trump and Putin at G20 Summit*). The dispute from *House of Cards* is transferred from fictional reality to the present real world by this image quote and evokes reminiscences of the Cold War, although Trump and Putin did not behave like their series counterparts. In addition to Boutet's statement that the series questions the relationship between journalism and politics in the age of Twitter, Wiedel et. al. also question journalism's ability to criticize the media in relation to politics and spectacle, leading back to the entertainment factor of the Trump presidency, which does not rely on truth and proven facts (Wiedel et al. 157).

Conclusion

Trump's media strategy and presidency are in many ways the culmination of a decades-long shift in Republican politics towards the right and towards more populist strategies. But what does this mean for American democracy and the public sphere? In his analysis of the *Spiegel*

cover, Lorenz Klumpp states that Donald Trump is a personified catastrophe (Klumpp 113 f.). Scholarship on ACR confirms this claim. The power of images, as Horst Bredekamp describes them, is evident in *House of Cards*. The images that are created in the fictional reality become part of the historical imagination through changed media consumption and use. In addition to the institutionalized, even ritualized, process of the *presidential portrait*, the world's population is confronted with a flood of images in (social) media. The process to distinguish between fact and fiction is becoming increasingly difficult for the audience. The democratization of images of the presidency and the unrestricted access to media, both as a consumer and as a producer, potentiates the reception and reproduction of *presidential portraits* and civil religious visual narratives. If skills of visual decoding and understanding are not trained simultaneously and images are viewed more critically, Hoffjann should be right, and, in the future, the question of fact and fiction could be subordinate to the media-effective spectacle that Frank Underwood ushered in by designing a prescient vision of the future.

After Donald Trump refused to accept his loss in the 2020 presidential election, he acted against his oath of office on January 6, 2021, agitating the demonstrating group consisting of *Proud Boys*, white supremacists, and other supporters to attack the US Capitol. This act of violence led to criminal charges against Donald Trump and raised uncertainties whether he could run for president in 2024. Although he was already a convicted criminal in early 2024, he announced his presidential candidacy. Media and news reports, apart from *Fox News*, distanced themselves from Trump as a presidential candidate, since he had proven that he did not act appropriately to the office's values and that he did not honor the values of American democracy. The assassination attempt on Donald Trump on July 13, 2024, during an election rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, was recognized by the broad media and Trump's election campaign team as a moment that could influence people. They used images of the attack, especially the one described in the quote below, to build momentum.

In the news photo that circulated shortly after, taken by Evan Vucci, of the Associated Press, Trump is set against a clear blue sky, and four Secret Service agents clutch at him, one of whom stares directly at the camera, his eyes shielded by a pair of black sunglasses. An American flag appears to almost float over the scene. Trump's lips are pursed, his eyes narrowed, and his chin slightly raised. There are streaks of blood atop his right ear, and on his cheek. He is looking out far beyond what the camera can take in—at the public, at the future—and he is defiant. Whoever tried to kill him failed. It is already the indelible image of our era of political crisis and conflict. (Wallace-Wells)

Meanwhile, Evan Vucci's photograph became iconic. This can be explained on the one hand due to the civil religious meaning of an assassination (attempt) on an American president and the martyrdom connected to it, and on the other hand, with the civil religious symbols and commonly remembered images in the photograph. The composition of the photograph resembles commonly known images like Eugene Delacroix's painting, *Liberty Leads the People*, Thomas E. Franklin's *Raising the Flag at Ground Zero*, after 9/11, as well as Joe Rosenthal's *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*. Discussing civil religious symbols, the composition also suggests

a civil religious apotheosis of Donald Trump, which goes against his de facto polarizing ideology. Apotheosis refers to a formal statement that a person has become God-like. Humans usually become civil religious gods for their character traits and their impact on society. In the context of ACR, former presidents conceptualized and imagined as civil religious gods are George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama could be included as well. While Trump is a pop cultural and visual icon, he wasn't a (former) president to join the heavenly realm of ACR yet. Nevertheless, after the assassination attempt, Donald Trump's campaign team and he himself disseminated the narrative that he was chosen by God to lead America into a better future. Consequently, following the democratic protocol, leaders around the world sent get-well-wishes and the Republican Party officially elected Donald Trump as the presidential nominee. Although assassination attempts are connotated with martyrdom and civic devotion, Trump's approval only rose to 40% after the assassination attempt (Pereira). While Trump has shattered democratic beliefs and stands for anything but the land of the free, in their collective tradition of commemoration, the American people now could praise Trump as an American hero because of his visual political communication strategy after the assassination attempt. Drawing the line back to Frank Underwood, the character also survived an attempt on his life in the series. Likewise, in the series, the assassination attempt takes place during a presidential election campaign. The assassination attempt would serve as a campaign asset, with Underwood gaining the advantage over his opponent, Heather Dunbar, who had the advantage over Underwood prior to the attempt on Underwood's life, due to public sympathy. In 2024, in the case of Donald Trump, the world audience could observe that entertainment, images, and a strong media strategy can win the American presidency. If the quintessence of pop-cultural visual quotations like those drawn from *House of Cards* is merely the spectacle they evoke, the question of civil religious morality and motive no longer needs to be asked with regard to American politics. It is important to develop media competence among viewers to be able to distinguish fact from fiction and critically question current political events.

I explained in the sections above how much the *presidential portrait* as an independent art historical genre contributes to ACR, preserving its core values, symbols, and traditions. It was also shown that presidential election campaigns and the media made use of *presidential portraits* to support or counteract their arguments. In the twenty-first century, streaming and binge-watching not only changed viewing habits, but Netflix also actively designed a prescient vision of the future in *House of Cards*. Entanglements between the fictional reality and the real world, as well as the use of *presidential portraits*, showed the audience how civil religious narratives can be deconstructed, become devoid of any meaning, and finally destroyed. In real American politics, citizens are confronted with a president who, like Underwood, openly acts against his oath of office and many civil religious values. In his inaugural address on January 20, 2025, Donald Trump said that with him the golden age of America begins (Trump). Like his fictional counterpart, Trump was not at all conciliatory in his speech and broke with civil religious traditions here as well, accusing and attacking the Biden administration. Eventually,

he was less hesitant to openly share his agenda with his audience, unlike Frank Underwood, whose secrecy was key to his success. Apart from his audience on the other side of the screen, whom he made accomplices of his dirty deeds, there were very few people in the series who knew Underwood's intentions or plans. This is contrary to Donald Trump, who told everybody what he was up to and what he would do when reinstated as president. So, in his Second inaugural address, he stated: "Our sovereignty will be reclaimed. Our safety will be restored. The scales of justice will be rebalanced. The vicious, violent, and unfair weaponization of the Justice Department and our government will end" (Trump). It is very likely that Trump and his strategy team will keep on reinterpreting and staging visual narratives for their agenda, not only by using civil religious but also pop-cultural references.

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