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► **To cite this version:**

Eline Reinhoud. “Dive, thoughts, down to my soul’: The Politico-Aesthetic Function of the Vice and the Machiavel in Richard III and House of Cards”. 2019. halshs-02324710

HAL Id: halshs-02324710

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02324710>

Preprint submitted on 22 Oct 2019

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“Dive, thoughts, down to my soul’: The Politico-Aesthetic Function of the Vice and the Machiavel in *Richard III* and *House of Cards*”

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While a comparison between politicians and actors usually leads to cynical jokes more than anything (e.g. one acts for money, and the other one is the actor), today’s popular television series about politics actively play with it, and in some cases even erase the difference altogether. The most astonishing recent example is perhaps Volodymyr Zelensky, who played the role of the Ukrainian president, first on screen in *Слуга народу* (*Servant of the People*) and since the 2019 Ukrainian elections also in real life, despite having practically no political experience.¹ Such transgressions of the difference between aesthetics and politics are characteristic of the so-called ‘age of post-truth’, where facts are rapidly losing value and emotion reigns supreme.

This ‘post-truth’ phenomenon has of late sparked a lively debate concerning its possible causes, but a solution remains out of reach, partly because the definition of the idea itself is still under discussion.² Post-truth is popularly understood as “[r]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,”³ but this is a limited understanding. For example, one could argue that the ‘post’ of post-truth is misleading, because emotions have *always* been more influential than facts in politics, as demonstrated for example by Lauren Berlant in her theorisation of public intimacy. She signalled the immense influence of emotion and affect in shaping the American public debate already in 1997: “[T]he political and the personal [have been collapsed] into a world of public intimacy” which concerns itself with such private issues as “pornography, abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values.”⁴ Additionally, one might argue for the importance, effectiveness, and historicity of lying in politics, especially in comparison to the notion of ‘objective facts’, as for example Martin Jay does in *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics*, where he

¹ Cf. Kara Fox, “Volodymyr Zelensky Played Ukraine’s President on TV. Now It’s a Reality,” *CNN*, 21 Apr. 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/04/21/europe/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraine-president-profile-intl/index.html. Accessed 24 August 2019.

² For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of post-truth and the discussions surrounding it, see Eline Reinhoud, *The Post-Truth Era: Crises of Truth in (Post-)Postmodern Literature*, RMA Thesis, Utrecht University, 2019, dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/384022.

³ “Post-Truth, Adj.” Def. 2. *OED Online*, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/58609044. Accessed 3 July 2019.

⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, ed. Michèle Aina Barale et al. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 1.

refers to Michel de Montaigne's defence of "*mensonges officieux* (altruistic lies that are for someone else's benefit[])," ⁵ which is in turn based on Plato's similar justification of "'noble lies' ... when politics is involved" ⁶. Briefly put, I understand post-truth as a specific, but not altogether new attitude and rhetoric that has gained unprecedented currency today, ⁷ largely due to information overflow and pollution on and of contemporary online, social, and news media. It consists of two major components, namely a selective use of information and an apathetic disregard for the distinction between truth and lies. In other words, we have arrived at a dangerous but immensely interesting crossing of emotion and apathy: a certain segment of our society (think anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, flat-earthers, conspiracy theorists, et cetera) acts on what *feels* true, and does not care whether it *is* true.

This crisis of truth, where facts easily become lost in a wilderness of fake news, cannot be solved by referring to more truths and facts, primarily because it is exactly this wilderness, this overflow, that exacerbates, or even constitutes, the problem. Therefore, in this essay I will take a different approach. Rather than adding more facts to the already existing, but largely ignored pile, I will try to turn post-truth on itself, by approaching the post-truth audience using something that makes them feel good: theatre, or rather television series. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's theory of politics and aesthetics as forms of dissensus, or agents of change, I will (re)conceptualise the politico-aesthetic function of Early Modern and postmodern descendants of the medieval Vice character and the Early Modern Machiavel, ⁸ in order to explore how such characters encourage what Rancière calls the emancipation of the spectator. I will look particularly at how these functions are performed by Shakespeare's character Richard III (1590s) and *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood (2013-2018): how they involve the audience

⁵ Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2010), 50.

⁶ Jay, 50.

⁷ This post-truth attitude and rhetoric are not necessarily split between audience and disseminator, one having a particular attitude and the other using a particular rhetoric. Rather, these elements are both present on either side; as such, post-truth is not so much a question of intent as of general stultification, to the extent that people may not even be aware of being either audience to or disseminator of it. Then again, there are also plenty of individuals who have noticed this stultification and have become adept at feigning it for political purposes. The difference is roughly that between a Donald Trump and a Boris Johnson; both are post-truth types, but one at least appears to know what he is doing.

⁸ It is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current essay to engage with the exact connections between the Early Modern and the postmodern period in detail. The connections between these two periods, for example as times of epistemological crisis, have been extensively discussed by various scholars, including Attila Kiss, *Double Anatomy in Early Modern and Postmodern Drama* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2010); and: Ágnes Matuska, *The Vice-Device: Iago and Lear's Fool as Agents of Representational Crisis* (Szeged, JATEPress, 2011). All future page references to Matuska will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text. See Matuska especially for an in-depth examination of the Vice and his descendants.

in their plots, the dynamic this creates, and the degrees of spectator complicity they evoke. While it would be overly ambitious to propose any solutions to the crisis of post-truth in this paper, I will nonetheless take some first steps in exploring how the apathy and general disengagement of a post-truth audience may be punctured by a(n) (re)emancipation of the subject as brought about by descendants of the Vice and the Machiavel.

As I have already mentioned, the relation between aesthetics and politics is particularly strained in this time of post-truth, but it is also where we may begin looking for solutions. Over the past few decades, Rancière has famously brought aesthetics and politics together in his notion of the distribution, or partition, of the sensible. In summary, this is “the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime.”⁹ A helpful notion to unpack this idea is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s distinction between different kinds of representation, via the German *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, which she respectively understands as “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy.”¹⁰ That which is represented, either politically, aesthetically, or both, becomes visible, audible, sensible. That which is not, remains invisible, inaudible, insensible. The act of representation or lack thereof determines what can and cannot be discussed and changed. In other words, art, politics, and the combination and mutuality thereof – after all, “politics has its aesthetics, and aesthetics has its politics”¹¹ – function as agents of change, as “forms of *dissensus* [that may] effect a redistribution of the sensible.”¹²

This redistribution of the sensible may be brought about in various ways within the realms of aesthetics and politics. Rancière argues that in theatre, it occurs in the interaction between the actors and the audience, rather than by the actors alone.¹³ As he explains, he rejects the common assumption that the audience is either passive or active, let alone an entity separate from the actors. While playwrights like Bertold Brecht and Antonin Artaud sought through various means to activate what they perceived as a passive audience, Rancière argues that this

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), 1.

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 1988) 271–313: 275.

¹¹ Rancière, *Politics* 62.

¹² Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steve Corcoran (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010) 1, emphasis as in original.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” opening of the 5th international summer academy in Frankfurt on August 20, 2004, published in a slightly revised form in *Artforum* (March 2007): 270-281: 277-8.

rests on a false dichotomy. Rather, he argues, “it is precisely the attempt at suppressing the distance [between actor and spectator] that constitutes the distance itself.”¹⁴ Such binaries and their accompanying assumptions (e.g. spectatorship is bad because it is passive, and acting is good because it is active) constitute a partition of the sensible, because the value judgement inherent in these binaries creates a power dimension, an inequality, that is not necessarily there, but nonetheless influences the representation of either side of that binary. In line with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, Rancière argues that individual spectators are also actors in their own way; they “see, feel, and understand something to the extent that they make their poems as the poet has done; as the actors, dancers, or performers have done.”¹⁵ Through the understanding that the audience and actors alike are active, emancipated, and intelligent – in other words, equal –, the false dichotomy and distribution of the sensible can be overthrown. It might be questioned, however, whether Rancière’s argument still applies today. A post-truth audience, struck by inertia and apathy, is in many ways opposed to Rancière’s emancipated spectator. Even if a dialogue is established, it is much easier to shout ‘fake news!’ – which has of late become more a tool to discredit and dismiss information that does not suit one’s (political) agenda than an actual statement regarding the information’s factuality – than to engage critically with either aesthetics or politics.

However, Rancière’s concepts can nonetheless illustrate how a(n) (re)emancipation of the audience, or the subject more generally, may theoretically be achieved. By actively playing with and explicitly reflecting on the partition of the sensible, the Early Modern and postmodern descendants of the Vice and the Machiavel may remedy this post-truth apathy. Before looking specifically at this function, it is necessary to outline the differences between these characters. Admittedly, this is a difficult task, as on the Early Modern stage the more psychologically complex villains would usually display traits of both characters and as such cannot be categorised as either one or the other. The characters are similar in many ways: while they come from different backgrounds and date from different time periods – the former from the medieval morality plays, the latter from Niccolò Machiavelli’s notorious socio-political treatise, *The Prince* – both characters are traditionally known for their slippery appeal and skilful manipulation of other characters and audiences alike. They tend to be ambiguous, either regarding their moral status and their part within the play, or more generally in the scholarly

¹⁴ Rancière, “Emancipated” 277.

¹⁵ Rancière, “Emancipated” 277.

understandings of the character. This ambiguity makes the combination of the Vice and the Machiavel in a single character such as Richard III or Frank Underwood particularly agile and difficult to pin down, and as such sufficiently fascinating to rigorously redistribute the sensible.

In the case of the Machiavel, there appears to be no consensus on the features of the archetype beyond the *OED*'s definition,¹⁶ which simply refers to the term's derogatory use and its roots in Machiavelli's treatise. This definition makes no distinction between the theatrical type and off-stage persons, and as such applies as much to the character as to any 'real-life' Machiavels, making it rather unhelpful in an attempt to understand the theatrical type specifically. Beyond the *OED*, understandings of the type go in completely opposite directions. The *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, for example, understands the Machiavel as a character that is "[devoted] to evil for its own sake, with no other motivation required,"¹⁷ while Michael Donkor, writing for the British Library, states that "there is a clear purpose and design to [the archetypal Machiavel's] savagery", and that this savagery "is to be carefully and sparingly deployed."¹⁸ This lack of consensus can be traced as far as the Elizabethan period, when Machiavelli's work was primarily known in England through imperfect translations and distorting secondary material, which led to numerous misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and exaggerations;¹⁹ this is also why, in the late nineteenth century, Edward Meyer argued "for the severance of the Machiavel from Machiavelli."²⁰ Fear may also have played a part – after

¹⁶ The *OED* defines the Machiavel as follows: "A person who acts on principles recommended, or supposed to have been recommended, by Machiavelli in his treatise on statecraft; an intriguer or schemer. In early use also appositively. Usually *derogatory*." ("Machiavel, N." *OED Online*, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/111831. Accessed 8 July 2019, emphasis as in original.)

¹⁷ Stanley Hochman, ed. *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama: An International Reference Work in 5 Volumes*. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1984) 241.

¹⁸ Michael Donkor, "Richard III and Machiavelli," *The British Library*, www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/richard-iii-and-machiavelli. Accessed 7 July 2019.

¹⁹ See N. W. Bawcutt, "'Policy,' Machiavellianism, and the Earlier Tudor Drama," *English Literary Renaissance* 1.3 (1971), 195-209: 208; and: Margaret Scott, "Machiavelli and the Machiavel," *Renaissance Drama* 15 (1984), 147-74: 147. Contemporary critics such as Martin Jay have provided more favourable readings of Machiavelli's treatise, arguing that *The Prince* rather shows an acute (albeit blunt) awareness of the realities of statesmanship, which requires flexibility and decisiveness. As Jay argues, Machiavelli's preference for the cunning of the fox may rest not on a delight in deceit but on a distaste for the violence of the lion; his stress on keeping up the appearance of morality indirectly acknowledges the importance of that same morality; his rejection of abstract values derives from the understanding that these are of little use in the concrete, often ambiguous reality of politics; by grounding statesmanship in illusion and appearance, he acknowledges the untenability of natural or divine order, or even absolute truth; and finally, he appears to be highly aware of how ethical intentions may nonetheless result in counter-ethical outcomes (5-6). In this light, Machiavelli's sometimes brutal advice can be read as containing a certain realism, not sadism.

²⁰ Scott 148. Elizabeth Scott casts doubt on this understanding of Machiavelli's work in Early Modern England, arguing that "a dramatist like Kyd or Marlowe would have had little difficulty in securing reasonably accurate and readable versions of Machiavelli's original works" and that "Machiavelli was widely read, much debated, and

all, this was a time of brutal religious persecution and general upheaval. The distinguishing trait of the Machiavel, however, may be found in the character's roots in socio-political discourse rather than the theatre: whereas the Vice functions primarily as a dramatic, extradiegetic force (see also next paragraph), the Machiavel ultimately reflects human qualities, and is driven by human motivations, however deplorable. The most common motivation is a selfish desire for personal advancement, wherein the end justifies the means – as for example in the cases of Richard III and Frank Underwood, who both have ultimate power as their goal, either as king or as president.²¹ Having accomplished that goal, the plot and the characters' development tend to stagnate and end in death: a reelection is simply not as glamorous as an election, just as defending a crown pales in comparison to obtaining one.²² The Machiavel's difference from the Vice, however, is one of degree rather than kind: both characters have extradiegetic functions, drive the narrative, and the motivations for their actions may be dramatic as well as emotional. This becomes especially clear in their joint descendants: both Iago and Richard, for example, can be said to act out of jealousy and ambition, but are also “the driving force behind the game.”²³ As such, any distinction between the Machiavel and the Vice, especially between their descendants, is always artificial to some degree.

The scholarly understanding of the Vice is equally conflicted, but one prevalent difference between the characters is that unlike the Machiavel, the Vice does not need a clearly defined goal or motivation. The character of Falstaff is an excellent case in point: he is happy to simply cause chaos for the sake of it, not caring particularly whether his actions result in anything either good or bad.²⁴ As Peter Happé explains, the traditional Vices were “not

quoted at length in literary circles and at universities” (151). While this argument may be valid for the playwrights and literati of the time, it does not mean that they did not play with these stereotypes, or that the general audience did not rely on them. As Scott admits, there was “little attempt to distinguish between what might be educated from Machiavelli's precepts and what could be justly said of his own practice” (154).

²¹ Underwood resembles various other Shakespearean characters as well, including Iago from *Othello* and Henry Bolingbroke from *Richard II*. Another popular example of the Vice-Machiavel in contemporary television would be Petyr Baelish, or Littlefinger, from *Game of Thrones*. A detailed discussion of Shakespearean traces in such series would be most illuminating, but this is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current essay.

²² In Underwood's case, however, his death was rather due to the accusations of sexual assault against actor Kevin Spacey, which resulted in his character being written out of the series. Incidentally, Spacey had played the character of Richard III (dir. Sam Mendes, 2011-2012) just prior to playing Underwood on *House of Cards* (cf. Ian Crouch: “Richard III's House of Cards,” *The New Yorker*, 4 Feb. 2013, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/richard-iiiis-house-of-cards. Accessed 19 June 2019). Soon after Underwood becomes president at the end of the second season, though, the series' tension already slackens, and the plot becomes repetitive, because the ultimate goal had already been accomplished.

²³ Matuska 99.

²⁴ Matuska specifically classifies Falstaff as a descendant of the Vice-Fool and explores the different kinds of Vice descendants in greater detail. As she rightly points out, however, the Vice and the Fool “are not clearly

characters so much as embodiments of dramatic forces,”²⁵ and Ágnes Matuska adds to this that they were “not really part of the play’s events” (46), but can be seen rather as abstract, allegorical dramatic functions.²⁶ This outsider-status allows the character to provide critical commentary at a slight remove from the action and to function as a mediator between the audience and the play. Due to the character’s generally appealing nature, and despite his ambiguous moral status, the Vice establishes a degree of trust and complicity with the audience. Through a clever use of humour and dramatic irony, for example in soliloquies and asides directed at the audience, in which the Vice explicitly reflects on his own actions and schemes, the Vice guides the audience through the action. As Matuska explains, later Vices take this capacity for metadrama and liminality further, by explicitly drawing attention to the theatricality of the theatre, destabilising meaning, and even corrupting the boundaries between reality and fiction (104-5, 112-3). Of particular interest for the purposes of this essay are the Vice’s meta- and melodramatic qualities, the Machiavel’s ruthless socio-political cunning, and the politico-aesthetic devices they use to influence the audience.

As I have already mentioned in a previous paragraph, both Richard and Underwood can be read as Machiavels. Richard even explicitly identifies himself as such in *3 Henry VI*, or rather more: he claims he could “set the murderous Machiavel to school” (III, ii, 193). Both Richard and Underwood have been characterised as Machiavels, but they can also be read as a critique on Machiavelli’s treatise.²⁷ L. Joseph Hebert, for example, argues that the shortcomings in Machiavelli’s argument are also the cause of Richard’s final downfall, and his argument is equally applicable to Underwood. As neither Richard nor Machiavelli (nor

distinguishable” (72), and this appears to be the case with most later Vice characters; they often borrow and blend characteristics from other archetypes in addition to those of the Vice.

²⁵ Qtd. in Matuska 45.

²⁶ There is an interesting link to be made here to the field of perpetrator studies, where the trope of the monstrous villain is understood as a device to create a safe distance between the ‘good’ audience and the ‘evil’ villain. Such portrayals prevent audiences from confronting and understanding how horrible things can and do happen in reality. In the case of the theatre, subtle performative choices may influence the villain’s place on the scale ranging from abstract evil, such as portrayed more commonly by the Vice(-descendants), to the more human and tangible (though no less cruel) kind of the Machiavel.

²⁷ For Richard as a Machiavel, see Scott 152; and: Robert B. Heilman, “Satiety and Conscience: Aspects of Richard III,” *The Antioch Review* 24.1 (1964), 57-73: 59. For Underwood as a Machiavel, see Don Fallis, “Machiavelli Would Not Be Impressed,” *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016) 92-101. For Richard as a critique of the Machiavel, see L. Joseph Hebert, “Richard III and the Machiavellian Madness of Postmodernity,” *Public Discourse*, 15 Sept. 2017, www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/09/20004/. Accessed 22 September 2019.

Underwood) recognises any objective good apart from fulfilling their own desires, these desires become arbitrary, unfulfilling, unmoored, and meaningless:

[Richard's] conscience—far from being a manifestation of cowardice—is in fact the voice of practical reason within him, revealing that he has done no good to himself by committing villainous deeds for the sake of a crown that in itself is neither objectively good nor subjectively satisfying. (n. p.)

Robert Heilman, too, reads Richard as a Machiavel, although he finds “[h]is ‘I am determined to prove a villain’ and ‘I am subtle, false, and treacherous’ ... too explicit, and we scent the thinned-out, allegorical air of the morality play” (59). This combination of allegory and conscience, of ultimate power and inevitable downfall, is what made Richard, and now Underwood, such an appealing villain. Both are ruthless, cunning, and successful, with a vindictive lust for power, but are also witty, appealing, and metadramatic; in other words, makers and masters of play. Like their archetypal ancestors, they exude what Matuska calls a “genuine allure” (69). The audience is drawn to them against their better judgement, for their wit, their skilful directing of the play, and their acknowledgement and even flattery of the audience when they share their plans and motivations. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, the loathsome Richard “has seduced more than four centuries of audiences,” and the similarly deplorable Underwood was lauded for his “smiling and eager villainy” and his “twisted version of integrity.”²⁸ While they are the villains of their stories, they are the heroes of their stages. In both Underwood's and Richard's case, the character is best read as a combination of the Vice and the Machiavel, resulting in a particularly powerful player, able to redistribute the sensible by simultaneously showing and hiding their true nature: abstract evil, human evil, or perhaps a bit of both. The Machiavel alone cannot do justice to the characters' antics or their success, but when the Machiavel's drive is combined with the Vice's metadramatic awareness, the players become playmakers. This power, especially when it begins to crumble near the end of their respective narratives, is what makes the Vice-Machiavel a potential remedy for a stultified audience: in the act of showing the puppet-master's strings, these strings become sensible in Rancière's sense to both Early Modern and post-truth audiences.

²⁸ For Richard, see Stephen Greenblatt, “Richard the Third.” Introduction to the play. *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York, NY: Norton, 2016) 555-562: 557; and for Underwood, see Crouch. This adoration became problematic after Spacey was accused of sexual harassment. His frankly bizarre “Let Me Be Frank” video statement, where he indirectly addresses his personal situation as Underwood, did not help matters: when Spacey started to sound like Underwood in reality, the infatuation quickly ended.

I have mentioned in passing some of the metadramatic techniques deployed by Richard and Underwood: witty asides, dramatic irony, and addressing the audience directly. The television series, but also screen adaptations of *Richard III*, also break the fourth wall by having the actor make eye contact with the camera. These are all typical Vice-techniques, but they serve a Machiavellian purpose, and have long been associated with the role of Richard III.²⁹ Similar to current-day populist politicians, they present themselves as honest, open, or at least direct to their audiences, in order to flatter them with their confidences and corrupt them by drawing them into their plots – both in terms of the narrative and in terms of their conspiracies. They invite the audience to watch the plot unfold from a metalevel that they exclusively share with them, or at least give that impression. Depending on the performance, such flattery can make the villain appear most charming; in Richard’s words, “I can smile and murder whiles I smile”;³⁰ a statement that easily and chillingly transgresses from the realm of aesthetics to that of politics in President Trump’s assertion that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose any voters.³¹ This puts the audience in a difficult position: on the one hand, they know that they are dealing with a villain, aware as they are of his true intentions and cruelty, but on the other hand, the villain’s guile and centrality – being the only one to acknowledge the audience – makes the audience eager to root for him.

The fact that both Richard and Underwood are crafty statesmen within their relative plots is noteworthy here: in a sense, they (aesthetically) represent (political) representation itself, bringing the aesthetic, abstract, Vice-dominated realm together with the socio-political realm of the Machiavel, traditionally overlapping but separate spheres. By representing representation and focusing the audience’s attention on the politico-aesthetic tools deployed by

²⁹ See Barbara Freedman, “Critical Junctures in Shakespeare Screen History: The Case of *Richard III*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 47-71, for an analysis of the use of direct address in performances of *Richard III*; ranging from Frederick Warde’s ‘sideshow’ commentary on his silent film, reciting passages and explaining the situations like a doubly extradiegetic Vice character (48), to Lawrence Olivier’s “flirting with the camera . . . audiences were shocked and delighted by Olivier’s use of a direct address to the camera; it continues to rivet audience attention today” (59).

³⁰ *3 Henry VI* III, ii, 182.

³¹ Jeremy Diamond, “Donald Trump Could ‘Shoot Somebody and Not Lose Voters,’” *CNN*, 24 Jan. 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/index.html. Accessed 10 July 2019. The question whether Trump might be a Vice-Machiavel in disguise—seeing his background in television and his foray into politics—is an interesting one that would deserve more thought; in my opinion, he possesses some characteristics of both types (the drive to power, the melodrama verging on caricature), but lacks the nuance demanded by either, let alone the combination. This might explain the split reaction to Trump, with some seeing through his puppeteering (a fatal flaw in a Machiavel), while others believe he holds none at all (an utterly failed Vice).

the Vice-Machiavel to actively influence this representation, the play and series dramatise the partition of the sensible: they show, aesthetically, the brutality of how representation works, politically. One important difference between Richard and Underwood illuminates this further. While Richard is generally honest to his audience, Underwood rarely gives full disclosure and lies to his audience even at the metalevel, brazenly admitting this afterwards and calling the audience fools for believing him.³² Although this only temporarily damages the audience's willingness to be Underwood's co-conspirator, such moments, in combination with various metadramatic techniques, puncture the illusion of the play and the metalevel alike. It shows the audience that there is more to the story than the controlling Vice-Machiavel is letting on; an even more exclusive, more private metalevel. *Richard III* contains a similar puncturing moment, albeit inverted: rather than showing a superior meta-metalevel control of the Vice like Underwood, Richard's Vice-ness temporarily leaves him on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth, when his confidence is shaken by the revenging ghosts. It is one of the few scenes where Richard is alone on the stage without addressing the audience; instead, he talks to himself; "that is I and I" (V, iii, 181). This is the only moment when Richard's control of the metalevel crumbles, and he withdraws into a more private level of play that he shares neither with the characters nor with the audience. While they do so through different techniques – one by reasserting his control, the other by losing it – both scenes serve to shake the audience's trust in the Vice-Machiavel character; Underwood by asserting his Vice, Richard by losing it. By grabbing the audience's attention on the first metalevel and showering them with attention, and then excluding them from a more private level, the Vice-Machiavel plays with the audience's emotions and shows them the puppet-strings that allow him to control both the characters and the audience – in the case of Underwood, by showing that the strings are attached to yet more strings, or, as in the case of Richard, by temporarily dropping them. Their unusually direct relationship with the audience – making the audience complicit, part of the plot, before shutting it out again – can serve as a device to force the audience to reconsider their position vis à vis the performance: to become aware of the strings, and to decide whether they accept them and the partition of the sensible proposed by the Vice-Machiavel, or whether they will discard the

³² For example, in "Chapter 64" (*House of Cards*, dir. Robin Wright, season 5, episode 12, Netflix, 30 May 2017): "... I'm guilty as hell, but then so are all of you. Yes, the system is corrupt, but you wanted a guardian at the gate like me. And why? Because you know I will do whatever it takes. And you have all enjoyed it, been party to it and benefited by it. [Aside:] Oh, don't deny it. You've loved it. You don't actually need me to stand for anything. You just need me to stand ..." (48:45-50:30).

strings and (re)claim their agency within play; perhaps even making them, as Rancière says of the emancipated spectator, “see, feel, and understand something to the extent that they make their poems as the poet has done; as the actors, dancers, or performers have done.”³³

The combination of traits derived from the Vice and the Machiavel are what give Richard and Underwood their particular crooked allure. It allows them to capture audiences and to play with their emotions, and in staging the partition of the sensible, the audience is encouraged to (re)emancipate – to put themselves on equal footing with these sly rogues, to claim their own agency in the play of aesthetics and politics alike, to see them for what they are, and to decide how they want the story to continue: whether they reject the villain or continue to allow his puppeteering. As such, the Vice-Machiavel’s politico-aesthetic function is to provide a way for a stultified audience to become an ‘emancipated spectator’ in Rancière’s sense, and so encourages the audience to pierce through the fictions spun before their eyes. Having become aware of the many metalevels involved in aesthetics, audiences could— theoretically – apply this awareness in other areas of life as well, motivating them to shake off their apathy and break the vicious cycle that the current problem of post-truth is threatening to become.

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³³ Rancière, “Emancipated” 277.

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