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**Claudio Cristián Valdivia Díaz**  
**"A Critical Perspective about Politics as Entertainment"**

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**Abstract:** The administrative construct called "nation" has lost many of its capacities to influence reality. In this context, the nature of politics has changed. Politics has become another sort of entertainment. Democracy dilutes amid new tendencies. This article aims to analyse how contemporary TV shows and documentary films reflect this reality. We will carry out this task by analysing relevant products and confronting their content with the ideas of philosophers and thinkers who will contribute to contextualise our thesis. We have selected some representative shows on how the degradation of politics can be traced from popular shows to film documentaries that abound in the need for a critical perspective about politics and their transformation in entertainment.

**Keywords:** Politics, TV, Entertainment, Liquid modernity, Hyperreal.

**CLAUDIO VALDIVIA DÍAZ**

## **A Critical Perspective about Politics as Entertainment**

### **1. Why TV, Why Politics?**

Since the early 90s, TV Shows have gained popularity and relevance in the cultural landscape. These shows engaged topics related to central aspects of our society, such as the degradation of politics and its transformation to entertainment. We have selected the shows because of their popularity, narrative quality, and engagement with political issues in this context. First, *House of Cards*, because of its treatment of the political animal (Frank Underwood) as the man who lacks a moral compass and embodies the pursuit of personal ambition to the detriment of others. Second, "The National Anthem" from *Black Mirror*, which shows the fragility of politicians and depicts our societies' moral degradation. Third, "The Waldo Moment," from *Black Mirror*, as it illustrates how vulgarity has been introduced into the political arena and how entertainment (through comedy) stands as a substitute for politics. Fourth, the documentary film directed by Rachel Lears, *Knock Down the House*, which shows how the "political machinery" destroys the chance of having people from everyday walks of life in positions of power. Finally, the documentary film *The Great Hack*, which has been selected to illustrate how technology and psychological operations, via social and online media, have been carried out to win elections.

The theoretical framework utilised relies on authors whose thinking has helped us understand the nature of the social changes endeavoured through the last decades. Their observations enhance our reading on the literary substance of TV series. For example, from Hanna Arendt and her book *The Human Condition*, we use her statement about the inability of humankind to control the outcomes of their actions. Her observations from the area of political theory will be helpful to confront situations in which these shows analyse the current trends on our political scenery. We have relied on the works of philosophers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Slavoj Žižek, or Jean Baudrillard. Their thinking about the transformative process of modernity from solid to liquid, the current use of embedded narratives in politicians, and the concept of hyper-reality, helps us to analyse the crafting of information through media. We have also considered the works by the Economist Richard H. Thaler and the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio on their observations regarding the importance of emotions in society.

### **2. Politics: A Discredited Realm**

The first thing to state is the decline of governments: The loss of their past position of power to rule and impact society. This decline was explained by Zygmunt Bauman when talking about the passing of social fabrics from solid to liquid in our society:

the passage from the 'solid' to a 'liquid' phase of modernity: that is, into a condition in which social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard

repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour) can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set. (Bauman 1)

Parties, which are apparently on opposite sides, populate national politics but their interests are ultimately very similar. This situation promotes the degradation of politics by introducing specific individuals who land in the political arena to promote their interests. Concerning the vulgarisation of politics, Slavoj Žižek argues:

The problem is not that Trump is a clown. The problem is that there is a programme behind his provocations, a method in his madness. Trump's vulgar obscenities are part of their populist strategy to sell this programme to ordinary people, a programme which (in the long run, at least) works against ordinary people: lower taxes for the rich, less healthcare and workers' protection, and so on. Unfortunately, people are ready to swallow many things if they are presented to them with laughter. (85)

This vulgarisation demonstrates how popular culture (TV shows and the media) express their concern about politics, which decays and transitions politics into a status of entertainment. *House of Cards* is an example of corruption in the political landscape. The main character, Frank Underwood, interpreted by Kevin Spacey, portrays the hyper-realistic version of the politician: An aggressive individual who uses any means to climb into positions of power. He uses his influence to intimidate the congressional representatives and breaks the political and behavioural "rules" to get benefits for his political career. This twisting of values becomes the theme in the series. It is a realistic characterisation of the social morals in the contemporary world. We behold a process of free, excessive use of violence. As Hanna Arendt points out: "freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a prepolitical phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organisation, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves—and to become free" (Arendt 31).

Violence has its justification and is politically attached to the defence of fundamental rights. Using it to humiliate others and get an advantage over them would taint the acceptable use of violence and would pervert the system of liberties. In this context, Underwood finds an interesting way to solve the moral concern. Everything in his political strategy is about simulating his intentions. Underwood's crisis is the death of a girl in his district (*House of Cards* S1 "Episode three"). Underwood's words in the funeral for the deceased girl are to convince people not to develop their criticism but to "trust in the Lord":

The bible says in Proverbs, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And lean not on your own understanding." Lean not on your own understanding. God is telling us to trust him, to love him despite our own ignorance. After all, what is faith if it doesn't endure when we are tested the most? We will never understand why God took Jessica or my father or anyone. And while God may not give us any answers, he has

given us the capacity for love. Our love is to love him without questioning his plan. So, I pray you, dear Lord, I pray to you to help strengthen our love for you, and to embrace Dean and Leanne with the warmth of your love in return. And I pray that you will help us fend off hatred so that we may all truly trust in you with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. Amen. ("Episode 3" 31:53–33:21)

The idea of not relying just on our understanding is the basis of Underwood's policy. He does not want anyone to question his actions or intentions. Underwood exalts himself in a cloak of religion to avoid questioning. By requesting the public not to rely on their capacity for critique, he is placing himself in the position of a God that should not be questioned.

The associations between politics and the media are portrayed in the series through the relationship Underwood maintains with the journalist Zoe Barnes. They become confidants and allies, although Underwood uses their sexual relationship to place the hierarchy on her. She receives privileged information from Underwood and thus increases her status and popularity while being used as a conduit to instil Underwood's narrative in the media to accomplish his objectives. Eventually, Zoe quits the Washington Herald and approaches a different tabloid platform where the owner, who offers her perspective about the media, interviews her:

Owner: You're having a moment. People are interested. I'm one of them. But if eight minutes passes on anything, I get bored. In eight minutes, I can be bored with you, unless you keep me interested. I think you can. And I think this is the place for you to keep the rest of the world interested too. It's your call. I won't chase you.

Zoe: I'm definitely tempted.

Owner: Take as long as you want to look around. E-mail me your figure. I'll call you back with a counter." ("Episode 5" 08:30–08:56)

Before going further, it is necessary to consider the three hypotheses from Baudrillard about the media:

We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning. Consider three hypotheses.

Either information produces meaning (a negentropic factor) but cannot make up for the brutal loss of signification in every domain. (...)

Or information has nothing to do with signification. It is something else, an operational model of another order, outside meaning and of the circulation of meaning strictly speaking. (...)

Or, very much on the contrary, there's a rigorous and necessary correlation between the two, to the extent that information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or that it neutralises them. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving, dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media. (Baudrillard 79)

Considering the above, we can conclude that information is not directly related to signification. Instead, information arises out of mainstream culture. The more interested people are in something, the more available it becomes. The critical feature is entertainment. Journalists are turned into entertainment professionals to serve financial interests. The more information that proliferates through the media, the less informative it is, and the more it becomes entertainment: a supplement to the spectacle of politics.

Underwood enforces his strategy through a process of intimidation and victimisation. When intimidation does not work, his default position is to become a victim. Politics has become a stage to perform a spectacle of manipulation of the emotional world of the masses. Politicians are no longer interested in managing a government or improving people's well-being. Instead, they are professional simulators thirsty for power. The issue is that the actual power is in the corporations who own the money. Remy Danton, Underwood's ex-press chief, who changed jobs to be an employee of SanCorp, a massive gas producer who finances political campaigns, characterises the power these companies possess.

Underwood chooses Peter Russo as a candidate for the position of Governor of Pennsylvania (*House of Cards* S1 "Episode four"). He knew about his addictions to drugs and frequent use of prostitution. Due to these vulnerabilities, Russo is the easiest to intimidate. It is another source of power in Underwood's network of relationships. The manipulations Underwood exerts on Russo break him psychologically, and Russo becomes unstable and dangerous. Underwood removes Russo from his political career by getting him drunk before a critical radio interview. Russo realises that his political race to become Governor is over and that his reputation has suffered irreversible damage. Finally, Underwood accompanies Russo to his residence and kills him, leaving evidence of Russo's committing suicide. What becomes grotesque is Underwood and his spouse's declaration to the press in mourning Russo's death:

Claire: Peter was very special to us. A sort of magnetic presence that electrified everyone he touched. And my husband and I became very close to him in the past several months.

Underwood: Peter was more than a colleague, more than a friend. He was family. Our hearts go out to his children and to his mother, to all of those who knew him and worked with him and loved him. We would ask that all of you respect their privacy and honor their loss. Today is indeed a sad day for the United States Congress, for the State of Pennsylvania, and for all of us. Thank you very much. ("Episode 11" 51:34–52:09)

Interestingly, this statement is how they, Underwood and his wife, use Russo's demise to increase their popularity in the system of intimidation and victimisation. Here, power lies in the one who addresses the audience with a verisimilar expression of grief. Underwood used Russo for convenience to fulfil a purpose by ruining his reputation before killing him. Still, Underwood's use of words at Russo's funeral speaks of Russo as a beloved friend. This portrayal suggests that the key to politics seems to be a capacity to produce hyper-realistic versions of themselves that enhance public opinion in your favour. The image created is,

therefore, that Underwood's are sophisticated marketing products. They are a metaphor for current politics; an expensive advertisement, whose will to achieve power dominates everything else.

Underwood continues to escalate into power and convinces the Vice President of his credibility to run for the position of Governor of Pennsylvania. As a result, this leaves the Vice President position vacant so that Underwood himself can fill it in. The President instead sends him to see if Raymond Tusk, his multi-millionaire friend, would be interested. The President intends to probe and understand if Underwood is interested into being the next Vice President:

Underwood: And you don't make decisions based on emotion.

Tusk: Decisions based on emotion aren't decisions at all. They are instincts, which can be of value. The rational and the irrational complement each other. Individually, they're far less powerful.

Underwood: And which category do your thoughts on the vice presidency fall into?

Tusk: Do you hear that song? It's a hermit thrush. Can't see him. "Solitary the thrush the hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements, sings by himself a song". Do you know the poem?

Underwood: No, I don't.

Tusk: It's Walt Whitman. It's about the death of Abraham Lincoln. He's over there somewhere.

Underwood (to the spectator): Yes, I know the damn poem. We studied it at the Sentinel. I said to my professor, "Why mourn the death of presidents, or anyone for that matter? The dead can't hear us." And he asked me if I believed in heaven. I said no. And then he asked if I had no faith in God. I said "you have it wrong. It is God that has no faith in us". Deeper into the woods. ("Episode 12" 28:32-30:05)

The idea that decisions based on emotions are not decisions comes from a philosophy of the economy, rooted in Adam Smith's 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as explained by Thaler, Richard H. in his book *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics* (87-88). According to Smith, an Econ will always act logically in financial terms. Experience, however, has demonstrated that most people do not behave like Econs, and emotions and emotion perception inform many decisions. For example, we can consider Raymond Tusk as an old Pretorian who frequently practices the restraint of emotions to pursue good decisions. In *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics*, Thaler also explains that emotions are much more important than we recognise and much more dominant than we would believe. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio also describes how conscience is created from emotions and feelings:

Damasio's essential insight is that feelings are "mental experiences of body states," which arise as the brain interprets emotions, themselves physical states arising from the body's responses to external stimuli. (The order of such events is: I am threatened, experience fear, and feel horror.) He has suggested that consciousness,

whether the primitive “core consciousness” of animals or the “extended” self-conception of humans, requiring autobiographical memory, emerges from emotions and feelings.

Interestingly, both characters (Tusk and Underwood) reject emotions. Tusk believes that decisions based on emotions are not decisions, and Underwood denies the idea of grief and human faith in God. Tusk wants Underwood to assume the vice presidency and serve his interests, and Underwood wants Tusk to vouch for him giving free access of the Vice-Presidency to Underwood. Yet, by the end of their intellectual duel, both characters allow emotions to preside as a feature of their decisions, backed by Thaler and Damasio’s ideas. Underwood tries to attack Tusk by weakening his economic position but fails, and Tusk is unsuccessful in intimidating Underwood. Nevertheless, emotions are clearly at stake when they fight for their interests, no matter how much they try to deny their influence.

This affirms that politics is not the art of managing a country or taking care of what is best for the people. Politics is more of an emotional game in which the protagonists fight for their interests. What is the sense in voting for them, then? A vote in a system that rewards and heralds the best liar, and the champion of manipulation is essentially a simulacrum of governance. The question, therefore, becomes, if the politician does not govern, then who does it?

Underwood visits a church and addresses God. The way Underwood talks to God is another feature of his game of intimidation and victimisation. When things escape his control, he shows himself as a poor man submitting to more vital forces trying to ride the storm, but at this moment, he tries to intimidate God and take his place. His dialogue with God is so theatrical that it resembles the one Macbeth directed towards Banquo the ghost:

Underwood: Every time I’ve spoken to you, you’ve never spoken back. Although, given our mutual disdain, I can’t blame you for the silent treatment. Perhaps I’m speaking to the wrong audience. Can you hear me? (He directs his head to the floor as speaking to the devil) Are you even capable of language? Or you only understand depravity? [Door thuds] Peter, is that you? Stop hiding in my thoughts and come out. Have the courage in death that you never had in life. Come out, look me in the eye and say what you need to say. [Clatter] There is no solace above or below. Only us... small, solitary, striving, battling one another. I pray to myself, for myself. (“Episode 13” 21:50–22:50)

The difference between Macbeth and Underwood is that Underwood defies Russo and does not complain about the apparition. Instead, he fights God and Devil, and the dead, represented by Russo, who, as the victim, embodies Underwood’s crime and prays to himself. He declares his loneliness in a world in which he shall find no support from anyone but himself. This is in line with the individualistic nature of contemporary society. Underwood personifies the man of the Age of Uncertainty from Zygmunt Bauman as someone ready to break any rule if it is in his benefit:

The virtue proclaimed to serve the individual's interests best is not conformity to rules (which at any rate are few and far between, and often mutually contradictory) but flexibility: a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret — and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preferences. (Bauman 4)

Now we analyse a modern classic of TV represented dystopias: *Black Mirror* "The National Anthem." In this episode, we see how our volatile media devastates politicians and subverts morality. Politicians use media to keep the image of their governance alive. To this end, citizen's private life becomes the trading coin of the media. The plot of "The National Anthem" is simple: Princess Susannah has been kidnapped. She will be executed unless the Prime Minister engages in a broadcasted sexual intercourse with a pig. When the PM is told, his initial reaction is to keep it secret, but the nature of information is to expand without control:

PM: Spread? How many people have seen this?

Assistant: We take down one, six clones immediately pop up elsewhere.

PM: How many people?

Assistant 2: 50,000; that's our current estimate. The newsrooms have got it.

PM: They're running this on air?

Assistant 3: No, no, we put a type 5 day notice out immediately. And they're complying.

Assistant 3: For now, it's trending on Twitter.

PM: Oh for... fucking Internet. So what's now? What's the playbook?

Assistant 3: This is virgin territory, Prime Minister. There's no playbook. ("The National Anthem" 07:17–07:55)

This dialogue serves to establish the problematic relationship we have with media and technology. Its lack of adherence to regulations and its anonymity helps the information to spread without control.

Consequently, the concept portrayed in this event is defenceless. Meanwhile, this could happen to any of us. From this feeling of pity for the Prime Minister, there is also anger about our fragility. The loss of morals in media indicates the failure of morals in politics, since it is very much sustained in the media. This society is held hostage by its verbosity and its incapacity in shutting down the channels of communication. Our thirst for news is combined with and compounded by an industry that strengthens and expands with user inputs. Warnings of the absence of control are given by academics such as Hanna Arendt. Using her nomenclature, this is a product of an action that has no end:

While the strength of the production process is entirely absorbed in and exhausted by the end product, the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures



in the realm of human affairs are these processes, and their endurance is as unlimited, as independent of the perishability of material and the mortality of men as the endurance of humanity itself. The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end. (Arendt 233)

In short, we live under a net of actions with unexpected and sometimes unintended consequences. This is the backdrop where we behold the birth of a new moral understanding that would allow men and women to survive the consequences of actions taken during the previous generations. Hannah Arendt tells us that the only way to go forward amid this new understanding is by forgiving and engaging in new actions. Man is made to be active. Nevertheless, there is a moment where forgiveness might not be enough to heal the results of specific actions, especially where the consequences can be seen to affect complete ecosystems:

Men have always known. They have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act. (Arendt 233)

Eventually, the time runs out for the Prime Minister, and with the amputation of a finger of the kidnapped princess, the public opinion changes. This shows the immediacy of the media system, and its lack of adherence to any logic other than a mechanic of stimuli and response:

TV reporter: A few hours ago, public opinion was behind Prime Minister Callow with only 28% of the public believing he should fulfil the bizarre and illegal request. But in the wake of these images and with the delivery of the princess's severed finger to UKN, the mood is shifting.

Citizen talking: It would be humiliating but nothing compared to her suffering.

Man: With the appearance of the finger, he's just got to do it.

Man 2: He has to do it, what's the alternative?

Man 3: We can easily get another Prime Minister, but we can't live without a princess. Of course he should do it. (...)

Online polls suggest that 86% of voters now believe the demand should be met. ("The National Anthem" 24:58–25:41)

As a result, the impact of civic opinion on politics turns the event into a public spectacle. Here, we see the reverse of the traditional political situation, where instead public opinion

becomes the ruler, and the PM becomes the victim, humiliated by the public. With time running out to rescue the princess, the PM faces potential disaster and the public opinion mounts and additionally pressures him. The PM's assistant warns him about the consequences of not abiding by the kidnappers' request:

PM: It's not going to happen.

Assistant 3: To the public.

PM: Fuck the public!

Assistant 3: This would be one man of, to be blunt, questionable popularity, putting personal embarrassment over the life of a young girl.

PM: He won't even release her anyway; she's probably already dead.

Assistant 3: And if she isn't, he'll kill her and upload the video. Everyone will see it. The world will see it. The mood will borer on insurrection, and you will be destroyed, I guarantee you. Utterly destroyed. You just won't be a disgraced politician; you'll be a despised individual. The public, the Palace, and the party insist on compliance.

PM: Fuck the party!

Assistant 3: Refuse, and I've been advised that we cannot guarantee your physical safety. Or that of your family.

PM: But...

Assistant: I've made arrangements for the broadcast.

PM: I can't...

Assistant: I'm sorry, Michael, it's out of your hands.

("The National Anthem" 29:34–30:58)

Hence, the PM's dignity has been subjected to the public's will. He is only a piece in the construct of governance that politics represents. He does not have the right to refuse. He should go along with the undignified ransom, or his life and the life of his loved ones could be in danger. Reversal is a powerful tool that is clear throughout this episode. The PM is forced into a situation where he is obliged to rape the pig. Through coercion, his community is also metaphorically raping him. He appears livid, announcing that he has complied with the kidnappers' request. People at the pubs stare at him with ridicule. However, when he begins the act of raping the pig, people feel ashamed of what he is doing, ashamed of their brutality. They turn their attention to the appalling destruction of dignity that they are bearing witness to. By watching that perverse scene, they lose a part of their humanity. It is a powerful symbol of the manipulation of the public, who are taken advantage of by the images aired through entertainment. The line has been crossed in making people believe that a departure from personal dignity is rather a spectacle which is seen as fun. That, the humiliation of human beings might be enjoyable. The loss of intimacy and the promotion of absurdity are the primary tools in this process of converting the public into a collective mass, absent of feelings.

Finally, the masterful moment of the story reveals that the entire situation concerning the princess was false. Princess Susannah was indeed kidnapped, but her life was never in real danger. She had been released 30 minutes before the raping took place. It was all an elaborate Artist statement. The PM feels ashamed of what he has been forced to do.

He has been publicly humiliated, and his dignity obliterated. The whole series of events forces us to think about how politicians are tied to the media. They have become figures representing something in between comedians and famous actors. They cannot keep their lives private; Politicians are forced to embrace the media network. The outcome of the episode is explained in a short piece of news one year on that retrospectively reflects on the facts:

Journalist: On the one-year anniversary of his humiliating ordeal, an apparently unconcerned Michael Callow put in an assured performance at a public appearance today accompanied by his wife Jane. The other central figure in last year's events was also before the camera at last night's Children of Valour awards. Princess Susannah made her first public appearance since announcing her pregnancy. It was one year ago today that the former Turner Prize winning artist Carlton Bloom coerced the Prime Minister into committing an indecent act with the audacious kidnapping. As the anniversary arrived one art critic has caused controversy by describing it as the first great artwork of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But while cultural commentators debate its significance, there's no denial that with a global audience of 1.3 billion, it was an event in which we all participated. However, the incident failed to destroy a Prime Minister who currently holds an approval rating three points higher than this time last year. ("The National Anthem" 41:26-30:58)

Michael Callow addresses his wife, from whom he receives a cold silence. He has become just a face to the role of PM when outside his residence. He has lost his relationship with his wife. His life, privacy and self-respect are equivalent to three points of approval rating. Politics is a dangerous landscape where the boundaries of private life are blurred and disrespected. Those who dare to enter its domain risk their dignity and become puppets in a theatre where they should provide fun. Therefore, politicians today should be more and more media centric. They are expected to react on Twitter, update their statuses, and become part of the show themselves. Amongst this, their function of governing a country falls into a secondary duty.

The next episode to analyse from *Black Mirror* is "The Waldo Moment," in which a failed comedian plays the role of a blue bear who interviews politicians. The situation goes out of control when the blue bear, Waldo, starts gaining popularity, and the producer of the programme thinks about putting Waldo forward as an official political candidate. The mixture between politics and entertainment become more evident with the format they chose for the interviews. The strategy is not about finding out about what the politicians think and why but to mock them:

Waldo: So, what is a politician, Mr Monroe?

Monroe: Well, a politician is someone who tries to make the world a fairer place.

Waldo: Like Batman?

Monroe: Not exactly like Batman.

Waldo: Do you beat people up?

Monroe: No, I don't beat people up.

Waldo: Are you a pussy then?

("The Waldo Moment" 05:41–05:51)

As the series of interviews and mocking gains popularity, the figure of Waldo emerges as something fresh. The comedian (Jamie), unhappy to be an official candidate, complains that Waldo is not real. Politics and reality are similar metaphors because politics tries to figure out how to affect reality but only manages to be an organisational figurehead of governance. Reality is a social complex that requires the collaboration of the individual to achieve its eventual perceived state. Reality is a construct, which makes sense as far as we build its corpus and strengthen its logic with our own experiences and empirical truths. However, politics has lost its capacity to affect reality and has become another entertainment product. Losing its meaning, together with the prestige of its leaders, politics shows itself to be incapable of achieving its goal of "making the world a fairer place". For this reason, the argument that Waldo cannot be a candidate for being a fictional character is not valid because the impact in politics is more related to entertainment than to reality. This episode explores the possibility of politicians' image deteriorating so that they do not even try to simulate its entertainment nature but embrace it and become a brand similar to a pop star.

Eventually, Jamie meets Gwendolyn Harris, the Labour candidate for the election, and suggests that she use honesty in her campaign, mindful that the Labour party is the predictable loser of the vote. Whilst politicians are part of the entertainment; they hate voters recognising the truth of their insignificance. Without the illusion that politics are real, the need for politicians declines, along with the illusion that people can decide on their government. The myth of their legitimacy disappears as quickly as the illusion that they can affect reality:

Jamie: So why not be honest? Say, "You arseholes aren't going for me, so here's what I think anyway".

Gwendolyn: It doesn't work like that.

Jamie: Nothing does; that's why everything's bollocksed.

Gwendolyn: You're angry for someone who's doing well.

Jamie: I'm the voice of a blue bear. If that's doing well, then we are doomed. ("The Waldo Moment" 15:13–15:33)

What the episode describes in the next scene is how politics depends on the media. Despite the potential for humiliation, the politicians agree to debate with him. The constructive dialogue diminishes when Waldo mocks the Conservative candidate, although it can be seen again when Monroe addresses the comedian behind the facade of Waldo. Interestingly, Jamie feels the need to answer back and is angry, not as Waldo but as a citizen. Governments and politicians might have lost a significant part of their power, but the issues that worry the population are still at stake. Politics feeds on its topics, separated from citizens. What makes people angry about politicians is that they have lost contact with reality. Their function is questioned:

Monroe: I'm speaking about James Salter. (...) I think that this puppet's inclusion on this panel debases the process of debate, and smothers any meaningful discussion of the issues. So I return to my original question, is that really what this is for? He has nothing to offer and he has nothing to say. Prove me wrong. Huh? Speak, Waldo. Please. (...)

Waldo: What is this for? Is that what you wanted to know, Mr. Monroe? And the truth is, none of us know any more thanks to you. What are you for? What are you for? Thank you and good night. [Public applause] ("The Waldo Moment" 22:01–25:27)

After this, Waldo goes "viral". The producer proposes to him that he should present officially as candidate, and Jamie, who opposes the idea, makes a very interesting point. "Waldo doesn't stand for anything":

Jamie. Waldo is not real.

Producer: Exactly! That's what you said really hit home, he's not real, but he's realer than all the others.

Jamie: He doesn't stand for anything.

Producer: Yeah well at least he doesn't pretend to. Look we, we don't need politicians, we've all got iPhone and computers right? Any decision that has to be made, any policy we just put it online. Let the people vote thumbs up, thumbs down, the majority wins. That's a democracy. That's an actual democracy. ("The Waldo Moment" 29:27–30:00)

Again, this is similar to what happened in the 2017 US elections when Donald Trump ran for president, and through the Brexit vote with the discovery that a company, Cambridge Analytica, had been using data from voters from their accounts on Facebook as denounced by the journalist Nicola Confessore in his Article in the New York Times "Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far." The danger was in using personal data to influence public opinion towards a given candidate. The unauthorised access of personal information has become one of the biggest businesses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This information provided freely might have a significant impact on the democratic process. The relationship between viral information and reality is very close; nothing is fully real for the media and the public until it has gone viral. Its mass presence triggers the ability to transform reality. Are we living within a process in which the media network is substituting politicians? With the immersion of more and more of the population in social technology, traditional democratic methods are threatened. The apparent trend is that those who control social networks control the elections.

Subsequently, Jamie and the producer receive a visit from someone working for a foreign agency representing any Intelligence Agency of a western democratic country. He is interested in using Waldo globally:

Jamie: I'm a person.

Jeff: With respect, Waldo's more than you. He's a team, and you're open about that, which is fantastic. The honesty thing works. Waldo is a construct people not just accept but embrace. At the moment, he's anti-politics, which is a political stance in itself, right? But he could deliver any brand of political content, minus the potential downsides of a human messenger. (...) with a targeted, hopeful message which we of course, can provide. Energising the disenfranchised without spooking the middle via your new platform: you got a global political entertainment product people actually want. ("The Waldo Moment" 33:24-34:34)

The detail and relevance of the political discourse fades and gives way to a reality in which politicians are marketing products. The key idea is politics transforming into another entertainment device. Our society is interested in clowns who would deliver another helping of entertainment. For this reason, the ones controlling the entertainment industry accumulate more power and capacity for decisions throughout society. We cannot avoid thinking of the close relationship politicians have with social networks; what was initially considered a medium to connect people has become a platform to target potential voters.

Then, Mr Monroe talks with his assistant about the possibility of Waldo surpassing his main opponent in the polls, Gwendolyn Harris. Their feelings of abnormality grow as Waldo's popularity increases:

Assistant: Did you see Gwendolyn Harris yesterday? She looks like she's been poisoned.

Monroe: Because he's gonna overtake her. If that thing is the main opposition, then the whole system looks absurd. Which it may well be. But it builds these roads. ("The Waldo Moment" 35:54-36:14)

Absurdity has taken over in electoral debates in powerful countries such as Brazil or the UK and broader elected communities such as the EEUU. Furthermore, this nonsense in politics helps us link Waldo's behaviour with contemporary politics: designed to entertain rather than protect the people's rights. In the distant future, Jamie is shown to be homeless. The air of an oppressive regime is tangible. He stares at the big screens to see how his Waldo character has become global. Waldo's effigy is seen in Japan, Africa, or America, where he is treated as badly as human waste, depicting how easily power drops out of what is not valid anymore.

### **3. The Documentary Perspective**

*Knock Down the House* (Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria, et al., narration. *Knock Down the House*, Jubilee Films, 2019) is a documentary film about a series of women running for the Congress of the United States of America in the mid-term election in 2018. Here we learn not about how fiction analyses the process but how the candidates go through the excruciating path of opposing the career politicians that have the support of their parties. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez explains how the political machines work:

Alexandria: Basically, what political machines do is they suppress democracy. The whole game here is to prevent you from getting on the ballot in the first place. Joe Crowley is not just a Congressman. He's the Congressman; he's the Chairman of the Queens Democratic Party; he's the district leader. Joe Crowley has appointed every board of elections judge. When you turn in your signatures to get on the ballot, any tiny little discrepancy in the signature, they toss the signature out. So, even though the actual requirement is 1,250 because we're challenging the boss, we need to collect 10,000 signatures. (*Knock Down the House* 19:10–20:00)

The expression of political machines introduces the metaphor of the industrial processes and machinery in politics. In this context, Alexandria and the other women in this film represent anonymous names that challenge the political machinery. Only Alexandria could turn views by clever use of social media and advertising. Although she had extremely limited funds for her campaign, she refused to accept money from corporations. It is notable the number of obstacles that Alexandra and her team should cross just to be supported as candidates. The system has been arranged to oppose her. For this reason, she must go through excruciating paperwork called "petition cleaning" which consisted of revising every signatory that had vouched for her.

The hope of politics is building a narrative that can move the population. Therefore, politics should appear as plausible and practical as possible. For this reason, the study of stories is essential, because narratives shape our world. In *The Final Year*, directed by Greg Baker. HBO. January 19th, 2018; we see a chronicle of Barack Obama's last year as President of the United States. When asked for his advice on leadership, he replies:

Obama: One of the things that, I've learned about being a leader is... sometimes we think people are motivated only by money, or they're only motivated by power or these very concrete, incentives. But people are also inspired by stories. You think about the United States of America. We have a really good story called the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal". It was just a good story that they were telling about what could be. So it's worthwhile to listen to other people, and ask them questions about the stories that are important to them. (*The Final Year* 17:35–18:02)

Obama also warns about the immediacy of our world. The biggest problem in our societies is not the lack of resources but the excess of stimuli that cloud our consciousness:

In today's world, we live so much day to day. We look at stock numbers and poll numbers and, uh, the latest tweet, and it just fills us with distractions, with anxieties, fears. You know you visit a place like the Parthenon, and you're reminded that we're just part of this long chain. And we do our best with the little link of that chain that is allotted to us. (*The Final Year* 82:45–83:00)

With this in mind, we provide our analysis about *The Great Hack*, (Jehane Noujaim & Karin Amer. Netflix. July 24th, 2019), a documentary film about the Facebook Cambridge Analytica data scandal. It illustrates the idea that certain products intoxicate populations, whether in a social network, a blog, newspaper articles, TV or entertainment; people cannot escape if they have been targeted. It is time to face the cost of the Internet to our societies. We should consider the creation of an empire based on personal data from users, as Professor Carroll points out:

I was teaching digital media and developing apps. So, I knew that the data from our online activity wasn't just evaporating. And as I dug deeper, I realised these digital traces of ourselves are being mined into a trillion dollar a year industry. We are now the commodity. But we were so in love with the gift of this free connectivity that no one bothered to read the terms and conditions. (The Great Hack 03:57–04:50)

Hence, this TV documentary studies how personal data is transformed into power in using this data in a democratic election. Politics and the means to influence citizens have changed so much that those who do not use these media networks would not compete in elections. The question, however, is where the boundaries of the use of this data by companies are? How aware are we about the handling of our data? Are people knowledgeable on the tactics of psychological operations on voters? The whole process changes so fast that new ways of using personal data are being developed and implemented as the research for this paper is carried out. Personal data as a commercial asset comes first; human beings are not the priority. This monetisation of identities works perfectly in an individualistic anonymous world that evolves at overwhelming speed. This lack of control also fits with converting the political sphere into entertainment.

Additionally, interviewed by Cadwalladr, Christopher Wylie reveals the evil nature of the process of using personal data to influence the elections:

I think that, yes, it was a grossly unethical experiment. You are playing with the psychology of an entire country without their consent or awareness. And not only are you, like, playing with the psychology of an entire nation, you're playing with the psychology of an entire nation in the context of the democratic process. (The Great Hack 22:55–23:21)

Thus, People working inside Cambridge Analytica, like Brittany Kaiser, former Director of Business Development, point at how inappropriate the use of data was in the Brexit and Trump campaigns:

I have evidence that the Brexit campaigns and the Trump campaign could've been conducted illegally. (...) The wealthiest companies are technology companies. Google, Facebook, Amazon, Tesla. And the reason why these companies are the most powerful companies in the world is because, last year, data surpassed oil in its value.



Data is the most valuable asset on Earth. And these companies are valuable because they have been exploiting people's assets. (The Great Hack 29:54–31:09)

In short, these companies do not hide anymore. They have been capitalising on the use of personal data, taking profit, and using data to develop strategies that would allow them to become one of the most influential companies in the world. In other words, this surpasses political ideas about right and left. This fact is a problem with the entire democratic process. It is not about the best political stance; instead, it is about whether the governments charged with leading have used unethical strategies of psychological manipulation to gain support from their populations. It is about the vast difference between convincing voters through rational arguments or aggressively instilling your version of the facts into their heads. Without a critical stance, no democracy will survive. They use your identity as an asset to generate a profit and remove free thought from the democratic process.

Facebook is a company that is the primary source for the micro-targeting of probable voters, what Kaiser calls the "persuadables." She describes the process in detail:

The truth is, we didn't target every American voter equally. The bulk of our resources went into targeting those whose minds we thought we could change. We call them "the persuadables." They're everywhere in the country, but the persuadables that mattered were the ones in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Now, each of these states were broken down by precinct. So you can say there are 22 thousand persuadable voters in this precinct, and if you target enough persuadable people in the right precincts, then those states would turn red instead of blue. Our creative team designed personalised content to trigger those individuals. We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos, ads, every platform you can imagine. Until they saw the world the way we wanted them to. Until they voted for our candidate. It's like a boomerang, you send your data out, it gets analysed, and it comes back at you as targeted messaging to change your behavior. (The Great Hack 41:18–43:00)

However, what is the legitimacy of a government that has come to power by using military tactics on its population? Should they be allowed to keep governing? Should they go to prison? To date, not one judiciary system has assumed responsibility for those events. The citizens who voted in those elections had their democratic rights compromised. There is no official initiative to restore those rights. Instead, we have an acceptance that those governments are now effectively the administration, and nobody can make a claim against them.

Consequently, this says something about the loss of confidence in governments, politicians, and a system that no longer stands for people. Why not, then, portray politicians as Frank Underwood? Why not vote for Waldo or humiliate the Prime Minister? These are the metaphors today of how the public sees the political class.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, we might conclude that the political arena is no more the powerful catalyst of the public's will and benefit. It appears to be a compound of power, influence, corporations' interests, and media's toxic use. The time has come when people no longer take politicians seriously; they become a joke, a caricatured version of governance that struggles to muster people's attention. Therefore, it is time to turn off our devices and understand what happens away from our screens. It is the time to reject free entertainment in the era of full entertainment. It is the time to be critical of corruption in governments. The other option is ignorance, darkness, slavery, and abuse. As expressed by Carole Cadwalladr: "Cambridge Analytica is gone, but it's important that the Cambridge Analytica story actually points to this much bigger, more worrying story, which is that our personal data is out there and being used against us in ways we don't understand" (The Great Hack 80:00–81:02).

On the whole, this places us in a situation where we need to rethink our identities and protect our vulnerabilities. Concepts as entertainment, private life, and emotionality are mixed with the basis of our political position. The analysis executed through the Shows and films in this paper reveals that a re-evaluation of our relationship with social media and politics must be accomplished.

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### Bio profile of the author

Claudio C. Valdivia Díaz (La Habana, 1978) is a BA in English Philology at the UNED, MA in English Literature and Cultural Studies and their Social projection at the UNED, and is currently finishing his PhD in Philology: Linguistic and Literary Studies at the UNED. His main interests are Literature, TV, and Philosophy. Claudio started his military career in the Spanish Air Force in 2001. He currently works for a NATO Agency in Munich, Germany. He is married and has a daughter and a son.

Contact: <cvaldivia2@alumno.uned.es>