# V.F. Perkins and Television

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V.F. PERKINS

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In this article, I am interested in the ways in which the work of V.F. Perkins can usefully inform our understanding and appreciation of television drama. My contention is that there is value in applying Perkins' ideas to the study of television, and in making that connection an explicit critical and conceptual ambition. The following discussion lays out some of the groundwork in arriving at that position, and examines its congruity with Television Studies more broadly. Ultimately, the article seeks to explore the extent to which our appreciation of television's special characteristics can be enriched by evaluating some of its qualities in the context of Perkins' scholarship.[1]

In setting out these tentative proposals, it is not my intention to claim that television criticism has been entirely or egregiously ignorant to Perkins' writing or, indeed, that similarities in approaches do not already exist.[2] On the surface at least, there is a correlation, beginning roughly at the start of the twenty-first century, between the sustained resurgence of interest in Perkins' critical legacy and a turn in Television Studies towards some of the methods and approaches also found within his work. Whilst it is somewhat impractical to pin any specific dates on a renewed investment in Perkins' film criticism, it is nevertheless pertinent to note that a conference organised by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye at the University of Reading, UK, in March 2000 entitled 'Style and Meaning: Textual Analysis – Interpretation – Mise-en-Scene' can be regarded as a pivotal moment in terms of actively and strategically bringing together a group of scholars who shared a dedication to the close scrutiny of film style, which had been a hallmark of Perkins' critical writing.[3] Perkins gave a keynote address at the conference, was 'a tireless contributor' to proceedings (Verhoeven, 2000), and his landmark essay 'Where is the World?: The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction' features centrally in Gibbs and Pye's edited collection, *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (2005), that arose from it. The timing of the conference falls towards the beginning of a period in which a range of work emerged that was connected and, indeed, committed to Perkins and his critical approach.[4] Gibbs and Pye were dedicated and energetic proponents: in addition to their edited volume, for example, they launched the *Close-Up* series for Wallflower (2006-09), which collected together monographs that offered sustained close analyses of particular films, and made style-centred criticism their focus.[5] Gibbs' own monograph within the first publication of the series, *Filmmakers' Choices*, makes an explicit connection to Perkins' work, drawing upon his essay 'Moments of Choice' ([1981] 2020) as a key catalyst for the ensuing discussion (Gibbs [2006] 2015: 5). Similarly, Gibbs' 2002 book *Mise-en-scene: Film Style and Interpretation* cites Perkins as an influential source, as does Jacob Leigh's monograph *The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People* of the same year, and, published shortly before these titles, Andrew Klevan's *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (2000) emphasises the strong importance of Perkins' critical approach to the book's analytical stance.[6]

Within the first *Close-Up* collection, Gibbs' *Filmmakers' Choices* sits alongside Deborah Thomas' extended analysis of a single television title, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2000; UPN, 2001-2003) in a monograph entitled *Reading Buffy*. It is a simple endeavour to note the coming together of film and television within the work of two scholars committed to the sustained scrutiny of style.[7] Thomas goes slightly further, however, in her description of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as 'cinematic television' and (more controversially, perhaps, for reasons that will be referred to later) 'television aspiring to the condition of film' (Thomas [2006] 2014: 7). Whilst Thomas' analysis does attend to *Buffy*'s status as television, and the concomitant distinctions from film, it is nevertheless striking that her critical approach is aligned confidently with Gibbs' work on film in *Close-Up*. By implication, television is deemed equally suitable for close analysis, to the extent that its suitability does not necessarily need to be explained or, indeed, justified at length. (Instead, the suitability of this particular show can find justification through Thomas' fluent analysis of it.) That notion chimes with work undertaken elsewhere at a similar time. Returning to Gibbs and Pye's 2005 edited collection, *Style and Meaning*, for example, Sarah Cardwell contributes a chapter on television, entitled '"Television aesthetics" and close analysis: style mood and engagement in *Perfect Strangers* (Stephen Poliakoff, 2001)' (Cardwell having presented at the University of Reading 'Style and Meaning' conference in 2000). It is worth observing, firstly, a further instance of television being treated equally and unquestionably alongside film as a subject for close analysis and, secondly, that Cardwell frames her debate around a single television title, *Perfect Strangers*, (as Thomas does with *Buffy*) creating a specific area of focus through the selection of an individual case, just as a majority of equivalent chapters in Gibbs and Pye's collection do in relation to films. Indeed, Cardwell states this unequivocally from the outset: 'Through an exploration of a sequence from *Perfect Strangers*, I hope to be able to offer an engaged critical reflection upon central questions that arise *in this case* [my italics]; these concern mood and engagement, and their intimate connections with style and form' (2005: 180). Cardwell and Thomas' contributions are indicative of a shift towards thinking about television shows in more precise aesthetic detail, and consequently acknowledging that evaluative claims are dependent upon our experience of specific texts, rather than deriving from any pre-existing criteria one might want to impose, or generalised notions of television's overarching qualities. Indeed, Cardwell and Thomas each allow their chosen shows to guide their conclusions, rather than using them only as illustrative tools for broader assertions (consistent with their respective bodies of work in

Television Studies and Film Studies). We would not struggle to recognise these characteristics in aspects of Perkins' writing on film (although, as this article will aim to illustrate, his work certainly invests in overarching conceptual debates too). It is at least of interest to note that the rise of an approach in Television Studies that prioritises the detailed scrutiny of particular shows should coincide with a number of Film Studies scholars utilising Perkins to invigorate their own close analytical work.[8] As a consequence, sets of critical investments are shared across both fields within a period of time, and it is possible to relate these directly or indirectly to Perkins' critical legacy. This pattern continues from that point in the early twenty-first century onwards and, in Television Studies, I would suggest that we can trace Perkins' influence, to greater and lesser extents, in the more recent work of writers like Alex Clayton, Lucy Fife Donaldson, Elliott Logan, Steven Peacock, and James Zborowski; a group that also represents a trend for scholars to move between film and television and, in these cases, to carry over the practice of close analysis comfortably between the two.

Finally, a direct and sustained relationship between Perkins' writing and Television Studies can be found in the work of Jason Jacobs. Like Cardwell, Jacobs is a key figure in the drive towards the closer scrutiny of television and the positioning of aesthetic evaluation as a central concern within debates. Among television scholars committed to these approaches, Jacobs has been especially careful to acknowledge Perkins as an inspiration and his writing often shares important guiding interests. We can, I think, see how Jacobs has drawn upon this relationship to enrich his thinking about television, resulting in passages that align quite closely with the kinds of claims Perkins makes across his work. In a seminal article, 'Issues of judgement and value in television studies', Jacobs writes:

> We need to recognise that our criteria for judgement are in part derived by defining the nature of our involvement with specific texts. As with the analysis of all art, understanding that involvement requires above all concentrated study: minimally, the close observation of texts in order to support the claims and judgements we may wish to make about them. (2001: 430-31)[9]

These words are reminiscent of the position that Perkins articulates in *Film as Film*. We might recall, for example, chapters like 'The World and Its Image,' in which claims for the impact of aesthetic choices upon the ontological reality of films are supported and illustrated through a series of precise accounts of moments from a range of examples, culminating in a landmark analysis of the shower scene from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and its relationship to that film's wider artistic composition (1972: 71-115). If Jacobs' assertions sound uncontroversial today, with a significant number of scholars choosing to follow the course that he outlines, it is important to bear in mind that, in 2001, this wasn't an especially widespread approach in Television Studies[10] (just as Perkins' dedication to aesthetic evaluation was not replicated in abundance among critics and scholars at the time of *Film as Film*'s publication[11]).

## Credibility, shape and significance

I am mindful that moving towards a suggestion that Perkins' work could have a useful relationship to the study of television might be construed as an attempt to resolve or even 'solve' television by making it fit a model designed for film. In this configuration, television becomes the lesser medium and, possibly, Television Studies becomes the secondary discipline to Film Studies. Equally, I am conscious that references to Perkins might be read as a regression to older critical approaches, and that the endeavour could be seen to curtail the advancement of academic debate. It is worth taking these concerns seriously, and to reflect sincerely upon what happens to television, and to Television Studies, when we incorporate the work of figures like Perkins into our thinking. Is it possible that considering television in relation to other art forms (such as film) and using writing about those forms (such as Perkins' work) may enrich our understanding of television, rather than automatically diminishing its status? Might a consideration of those other forms, those other writings, actually help to strengthen an awareness and appreciation, of television's distinctiveness? And does the act of reaching back to existing critical practices, or sideways to practices from other fields of study (such as Film Studies) necessarily amount to a regression: something that impedes the forward motion of critical inquiry?

Even if we regard the integration of Perkins' ideas within Television Studies as positive, we should be equally mindful of respecting television's inherent qualities within such an undertaking. Care is required if we are to avoid drawing television shows out of shape, or misrepresenting their characteristics, by evaluating them alongside different contexts or from different perspectives. Bearing these concerns in mind, I want to explore how the specificities of a television text might be given clarity and focus when evaluated against ideas contained within *Film as Film*. In this respect, I am attempting a yet more direct association with Perkins' conceptual work and, indeed, my purpose involves the notion that there is value in making this kind of connection explicitly (rather than, for example, citing Perkins as an inspiration for a broader critical direction).

I am turning to a well-known example of American television: the multi-season serial drama *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-18), and beginning with the very first moments of the opening episode (a pre-credit sequence). The screen is dark as we hear the squeal of brakes, the smash of glass, and a dog's whimper. In the darkness, the front doors of a property swing open and Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) emerges into the night. He walks forward purposefully, down the few steps leading up to his building, as he searches the area for the source of the disturbance. Frank's journey from background to foreground effectively moves him from a medium-long shot to close-up, his features becoming more distinct as he looms larger within the frame. The camera tracks with him as he looks right, beyond our view, and advances in that direction and down the street, where he is joined by another

man from his neighbourhood. A reverse-shot captures the hurried progress of the two men as they make a discovery: Frank looks beyond the camera, saying 'that's the Wharton's dog', and accompanying sounds of canine distress are audible on the soundtrack. Frank and his companion are framed by a camera positioned almost at street level and, as they look at the dog beyond the frame, they also look at us. We might recognise the straightforward device of attributing status and power to characters by filming them from below (whilst acknowledging that the device does not produce that effect exclusively across all works, as it will always be dependent upon specific context). Here, however, the power relationship between character and viewer is intensified somewhat as we are aligned temporarily with the position of a badly injured animal, while Frank effectively looks down on us. This type of power balance will endure as the scene develops. Assessing the dog, Frank judges that 'he's not going to make it' and sends the neighbour away to summon the owners. A new shot frames Frank's progress as he walks towards the patch of ground where the dog lies and slowly bends down into a crouching pose. The dying dog remains hidden from our view, just below the bottom of the frame, but the animal's yelps and cries are still a prominent feature of the soundtrack. Without being visible to us, the animal's suffering is also filtered through Frank's responses and, again, we might note that he is further established as a controlling presence within the scene, shaping our understanding of events to a significant degree.

From his crouching position, Frank administers comfort to the dog, laying his hands softly upon it and shushing gently before murmuring 'It's OK.' He sighs heavily and then begins to speak: 'There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong. Or useless pain. The sort of pain that's only suffering.' As he delivers these words, Frank's gaze shifts around in different directions: to right of the frame, then to the left, and finally back down to the dog. There is a contrast between the fixed certainty of his vocal expression, as he calmly voices his assured knowledge of types of pain, and a physical evasiveness as his focus resists settling upon one location. And, suddenly, Frank is looking directly at us. Not because our position happens to be aligned with other elements within the scene, as we were with the dog earlier, but because he is actually talking to *us*. Fixing us in his sights, he

says: 'I have no patience for useless things.' A sharp twisting of his posture conveys that he has forcefully tightened his grip on the animal: he is suffocating the dog. He continues in a composed, efficient tone: 'Moments like this require someone who will act, and do the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing.' As he speaks, his gaze darts around again, beyond the frame, and we now understand this to be surveillance of other potential visitors to the scene, rather than only an act of avoiding the visual ordeal of the dying dog. Is Frank seeking to spare them the ordeal of this moment by checking for their presence? Or is he attempting to keep the violence of his act hidden from the world around him: searching for possible witnesses?

*House of Cards* allows this ambiguity to linger unresolved and, indeed, Frank's actions can be read as inherently ambiguous throughout the short sequence. There is humanity in his ending of the dog's suffering, taking grim responsibility for a resolution and perhaps sparing others a tribulation. Equally, however, there is a disquietingly sinister quality to the way in which Frank moves seamlessly from a compassionate demeanour to the corporeal brutality of killing an animal by hand, which he performs passionlessly. At a broader level, the show also spares us some vicarious trauma as the dog is withheld from our view. Yet, at the same time, we are brought especially close to Frank's actions, almost to the point of enforced complicity, when he addresses us directly and the camera remains with him for the duration of his mercy killing. In discussions of screen horror, it is often remarked (possibly to the point of cliché) that unseen action, taking place beyond the frame, can be greatly affective because audience members imaginatively fill gaps in visual information. Perhaps something similar occurs in this opening from *House of Cards*, whereby the choice to keep the dog hidden creates a yet more unsettling experience for us, which is intensified as we can still hear the animal's suffering, even if we cannot see it. Certainly, our inherent passivity as viewers is emphasised, as we are directed by Frank's profound influence within a set of compositional features and drawn into a relationship with him that is both intimate and uneasy. The sequence brings us close to him, but this closeness does not necessarily result in a full understanding of his character (underlining a simple fact that increased proximity to a person does not automatically unlock interiority). When we return to an extreme close-up of Frank, and he looks directly at us saying 'There. No more pain', we are perhaps encouraged to regard him even in these early moments, with so many contexts regarding this man and his narrative world yet to be revealed, as a multi-faceted character that resists straightforward definition (as uncomplicatedly villainous, for instance). We might, for example, want to say that his direct address represents moments when his truthful, candid thoughts are expressed and that, in contrast, Frank's interactions with other characters constitute a guarded, self-aware performance. And yet, he delivers the words straight to audience with a mannered poise that suggests Frank is crafting a further layer of composed performance even as he apparently confides in us. In this sense, the injured animal becomes a prop and that final line, 'There. No more pain', marks the flourished completion of an act. As a result, binary distinctions between authentic disclosure and calculated presentation become precarious.

In these opening moments, the show exhibits a set of especially pronounced stylistic choices. The use of direct address, inherited from the original British version of the show (and from the long-established stage convention of the soliloquy in plays like Shakespeare's *Richard III*, which inspired *House of Cards*), has a particular impact. Although television routinely features individuals talking directly to camera, especially in factual shows, the occurrence within a drama can still possess force. The employment of direct address within a fictional world introduces a diegetic space between that world and the audience, which in turn can offer potent opportunities for creative expression. We might say that *House of Cards*, for example, uses direct address not only to communicate Frank's thoughts to an audience but also to explore, at an early stage, some contrasts and tensions within his behaviour. Self-evidently, the ability to direct interior thoughts to an unseen audience is not a feature of our everyday lives and, indeed, Frank's actions occur within a distinct fictional context. At the same time, we would not reject the world of *House of Cards* because its world does not replicate precisely a reality that we

know and experience. A television show is entitled to employ any available expressive device, including stylised forms of address, in the pursuit of a compelling portrayal. As a result, we are invited to accept or perhaps embrace the world on screen as a specific and specialised fictional reality that has the capability to incorporate sometimes extraordinary events. This may lead us to questions of credibility and, here, we can readily turn to *Film as Film* as a practical source for further understanding our acceptance of the fictional world, and our relationship to it. As Perkins explains:

> On one level cinematic credibility is no different from that which we demand of other story-telling forms. It depends on the inner consistency of the created world. So long as that is maintained, the premises are beyond question: people can express their feelings in impromptu song, with or without instrumental backing; inanimate objects can be self-willed and malevolent; Death can be a devotee of chess. But the created world must obey its own logic. (1972: 121)

Reading this account of cinema, we can ask whether it could equally be applied to a description of credibility in television. Indeed, Perkins takes care to emphasise that his points regarding cinema are applicable to storytelling forms more widely, and there is no reason to suggest that television could not be included within that grouping. In the case of *House of Cards*, the characterisation of credibility would certainly appear to correspond with our experience of the sequence briefly described. While the moment at which Frank addresses the audience is striking, the event quickly becomes a facet of the fictional world's inner consistency, which we appreciate as logical. An impossible act becomes a possible occurrence within the parameters that this particular fictional world constructs through the actions disclosed to us.[12]

Perkins, however, does not propose credibility to be a single criterion against which we can adequately evaluate films. Rather, he describes a balance, which I would like to suggest can be usefully applied to our considerations here:

> The movie is committed to finding a balance between two equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides. It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance. (1972: 120)

In its opening sequence, *House of Cards* demonstrates ambition in its attempts to craft shape and significance within the fictional world: establishing, for example, complicated discrepancies between outward appearance and interior reflection, or presenting dispassionate action as having the potential to encompass both pragmatic care and ruthless efficiency ('the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing'). The decision to convey these qualities through especially direct means – the delivery of lines straight to camera by a character who acknowledges the presence of a watching audience – places demands on the scene. It involves communicating aspects of the world to us without breaking our belief in that world *as* a world. Breaking the fourth wall through direct address might be regarded as precisely the kind of thing that would risk disrupting the credibility of a fictional world, given that it has the potential to draw our attention to the constructedness or artificiality of a work of art. To use a term of Perkins', the expressive device could be designed and employed to 'shatter illusion' deliberately. We might consider, however, whether *House of Cards* instead uses direct address to enhance and enrich the fictional world depicted on screen, Frank's place within it, our understanding of each and the relationships between them. In this respect, it is important that the 'inner consistency of the created world' should be maintained for this particular television drama (whereas, it is quite conceivable that another show might legitimately choose an alternative strategy that seeks to disrupt or destabilise that inner consistency).

In factual television, the convention of direct address is necessarily associated with precise information-giving and, in examples of news, current affairs or lifestyle shows, the unambiguous clarity of message-delivery is often a paramount concern. While the conditions for a television drama like *House of Cards* are markedly different, there may still be a risk of Frank's speech coming to represent something that the show itself wants to assert, so that he becomes a mouthpiece for messages, potentially diminishing his status as an individual within a complex fictional reality. However, the discussion thus far might move us towards the suggestion that *House of Cards* exhibits a more nuanced approach as we are invited to evaluate Frank's words within the context of his wider behaviour, rather than accept them as a form of linear messaging. Indeed, a number of available meanings are effectively kept in play as Frank's relationship to his own words is made complex. He may regard his speech as an unequivocal endorsement of his actions whereas, with the show displaying the reality of his disinterested brutality, they could alternatively become an unsettling element. Equally, as touched upon already, we may sympathise with Frank's justifying speech, be repelled by his ruthlessness, or find ourselves caught between judgements. The show offers choices as we are invited to observe and gauge human behaviour within its fictional world. In the first few minutes of screen time, despite its employment of a particularly direct convention, *House of Cards* exhibits a delicate touch in its depiction of Frank, allowing certain questions regarding his behaviour to remain suspended in anticipation of an unfolding drama. Here, the rapport between actor, camera and script becomes a crucial element within the fine balance Perkins describes, where heavy or clumsy emphasis resulting from the desire to assert significance, for example, could result in the credibility of the fictional world falling away. At the same time, as Perkins explains, the effort to preserve that credibility might subdue or weaken the significance of words and actions, thus compromising the scene's status as a compelling dramatic event.

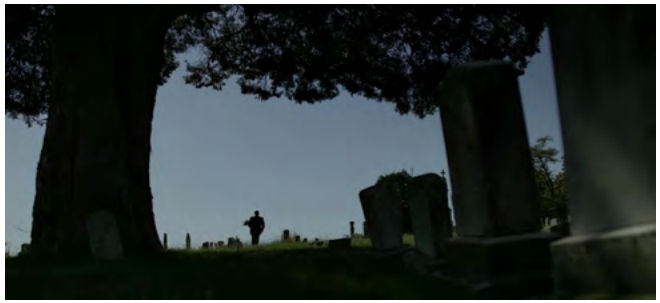
## Television, time and pressure

If these are hazards that *House of Cards* must negotiate in its first few minutes of screen time, we might consider the ways in which such risks persist or, indeed, are intensified as the show moves through the accumulation of hours in new episodes from new seasons. Taking this into account is important, I would suggest, if we are to retain an appreciation of television's particular qualities. Straightforwardly, while it is the case that some television dramas will resemble films purely in terms of their duration – a single work lasting roughly two hours, for example – serial dramas like *House of Cards* will extend well beyond this length as fresh seasons

are commissioned and created. In suggesting that the work of film scholars like Perkins can usefully augment an understanding of television, we should be careful to keep in view the contexts that underpin the mediums and that, fundamentally, film and television possess important differences. The question therefore becomes 'in what ways and to what extent can Perkins' film criticism enhance our appreciation of television's particular qualities?' Attending to the long form seriality of certain shows can be a factor in such discussions, and I want to pursue that line by considering a sequence that occurs at a later point in *House of Cards*' duration.

In the opening of the third season of *House of Cards*, a post-dawn motorcade of US government vehicles draws up slowly, framed in a low-angle shot, on a tree-lined track.[13] The authority of this procession is marked by the presence of government insignias and US flags on the cars, and underscored by a strident, minor-key, orchestral theme. The camera tracks forward to isolate a car door within the frame, which is opened by an anonymous staffer, and then tilts up as Frank Underwood (now President of the United States) steps out from the vehicle, in close-up, carrying a bunch of flowers. He walks forward, looks around, and sighs gently. Seven shots follow: an overhead view of Frank walking across a graveyard plot; two shots capturing the gathering of White House officials and press agencies around the stationary motorcade; a view of Frank as a distant figure making his way further and further into the graveyard and away from the camera and over the brow of a small hill; a wide reverse-shot that frames Frank's progress over the mound and into a further section of the cemetery; a side-angle medium-long shot that tracks his progress from the left to right of the screen; and finally a return to the wide reverse-shot as Frank nears a particular gravestone, looks down, and stops in front of it. In one respect, this succession of shots performs a basic role in emphasising the increasing distance being placed between Frank and the waiting groups of staff and reporters. At the same time, however, the accumulation of images creates a sense of Frank's solitude and smallness within the scene as his features and stature are reduced in the framing, often mingling with or becoming dwarfed by the assorted headstones and the trees that loom in the post-dawn half-light. Contrasting with the initial close-up of the character when he stepped out of his car, we can read these audio-visual choices as a gesture to humble Frank, or at least diminish his authoritative status as he continues his journey across the graveyard. This softening of his image is complemented on the soundtrack, as the underscore transitions into a lighter, hesitant, major-key melody when Frank approaches his selected gravestone (modifying and moving away from the forceful, minor-key motif that coincided with him exiting the motorcade earlier).

In the final wide shot, Frank crouches down at the graveside, transfers the flowers to one hand, and raises the other hand to rest on the top corner of the headstone he faces. We hear his voice: 'Hey Pop,' spoken softly, tenderly, and a cut to tighter over-the-shoulder reverse-shot reveals the name engraved into the stone: 'Calvin T. Underwood. 1935-1978. Husband, Father, Servant of God.' Frank uses his finger to trace out an invisible line under 'Calvin' as he says 'been a while, hasn't it?' The practical redundancy of this gesture suggests that it is motivated by an effort to achieve closeness, even intimacy, with his father's grave, a notion complemented



by the move to a closer reverse shot to frame the action. Placing the flowers on the top of the headstone, he continues: 'Did you see that motorcade roll up?' and, in a reverse medium close-up shot, 'It's the first time that the President of the United States has visited Gaffney. Can you believe it?' In this reverse-shot, Frank rises from his crouching position to stand over the headstone, eyes remaining on his father's grave, and he delivers his words in a low, soft, elongated rhythm that is suggestive of emotional warmth and, perhaps, pride. And then the mood changes: Frank looks directly at us, saying rapidly 'Oh, I wouldn't be here if I had a choice, but I have to do these sorts of things now. Makes me seem more human, and you have to be a little human when you're the President.' Spacey tilts his head slightly from side to side and wrinkles his nose a little, complementing Frank's description of a necessary but irksome duty that must be performed. A small shake of the head instigates a further flow of thoughts: 'He couldn't even afford to pay for his own gravestone – I paid for it, out of my own scholarship money from the Sentinel. Nobody showed up for his funeral except me. Not even my mother.' Frank's gaze moves between the headstone and us as he speaks, and his tone is now much more forceful, with Spacey placing heavier, deeper emphasis on key words like 'I', 'Me' and 'Mother'. The weighting placed on these terms contributes to a sense of Frank's underlying bitterness as he describes the funeral, superseding the affection that was evident in his voice just moments earlier. On the soundtrack, the musical underscore has developed from the tentative, major-key melody to incorporate a slightly faster-paced and more fervent rhythmical structure. This change corresponds with a new line of action: Frank pivots and looks out to the left of the frame and behind him, before stepping forward, saying: 'But I'll tell you this, pop. When they bury me, it won't be in my backyard. And when they come to pay their respects, they'll have to wait in line.' This final sentence is delivered directly to the audience, with Spacey dropping the pitch of his voice considerably on the word 'line' to a resonant, low rumble. While speaking, Frank has been shifting his posture and adjusting something below the frame. A reverse-shot reveals the nature of these activities: a jet of urine sprays onto the headstone as Frank desecrates his father's grave. We cut to the waiting entourage beyond the borders of the cemetery, and a conversation between a press photographer and Frank's Press Secretary: 'You should let us take a photo at the grave.' 'He wants privacy. The man's honouring his father for Gods' sakes.' And then we return to the graveside: Frank walks away and the camera rotates around to linger on the urine-splashed headstone.


It is apparent that this opening from season three replicates features found in the first moments of season one. The equivalent pre-credit sequences involve levels of candid direct address, the theme of death and dying, the concealment of information below the frame to set up a surprise revelation, and Frank committing an extreme act, for example. As a long-running serial, repetition is one of the dramatic options available to shows like *House of Cards*, and it can be used to build points of significance within the fictional world. It can also, however, invite comparisons between the use of similar techniques and conventions and, as a result, provide insights into how certain themes and techniques are handled across the wide span of episodes and seasons. In this respect, I am led to propose that the graveside scene exhibits shortcomings which, in turn, have wider implications for matters of credibility and significance. As a consequence, I would propose that there is value in returning to some of Perkins' conceptual arguments to better understand the degree of disappointment I experienced when first watching the sequence. Personal responses to television shows can provide a meaningful foundation for further evaluative work and this work, in turn, can usefully focus and develop those initial reactions.

The sequence hinges upon a trick of misdirection when our understanding of Frank's visit as a sentimental gesture is reversed emphatically: not only is he bitter about his father's life, he soils the lasting tribute to him. In order to achieve this bait-and-switch, the show has to depict him rapidly changing his attitude, tone and demeanour, so that his original compassion is shown to be playacting. (And the portrayal of his character as he makes his away across the cemetery, framing him as an increasingly humble and diminished figure, works as a form of compositional playacting, setting up the reveal that he is neither.) The tactic serves the delivery of the trick perfectly well – Frank's transformation has the capacity to

surprise – but it carries with it repercussions for the position of his character within the fictional world. We are entitled to ask what motivates Frank to behave initially with such open affection towards his father's grave at the outset, for example. It is made explicitly clear, through the succession of shots of him walking through the cemetery, that he is far-removed from witnesses, and so the continued pretence possesses a questionable motivation. We might possibly read it as Frank putting on an act for his own perverse amusement, but this seems an elaborate justification for behaviour that is out of step with a hitherto subtle and complex characterisation. We may even stretch to suggest that Frank's awareness of the audience motivates the pretence – that he is playacting for us – but that equally seems inconsistent with the nature of the direct address employed in the show, which rests upon the character striving for complicity through disclosure, rather than attempting obfuscation or misdirection within the convention (although these qualities can certainly feature in his relationships with other characters in the show).

As an alternative, I would contend that Frank's actions have been contrived, or even imposed, externally on the part of the show-makers to facilitate the effect of the twist, rather than emanating internally within the context of this scene. This has implications for credibility, of course, as it affects the extent to which we are able to plausibly accept the fictional world according to its own internal logic but, equally, there are ramifications for the way in which significance is being sought within the scene. The trick of misdirection is laid out too directly and articulated only in terms of sharp binary oppositions (Frank pretends to be sentimental and respectful but is actually bitter and vindictive), which undermines the effort but also limits any lasting significance: once the trick is revealed, there is little more to say about it. This contrasts with the equivalent sequence from season one in which Frank's actions were imbued with an intellectual and moral ambiguity, inviting further contemplation of his character through the extraordinary actions he performs. In this later sequence, however, these aspects of Frank's character are sidelined in the pursuit of an effect which may have impact but which is somewhat one-dimensional, arguably rendering him as a limited element within the scene. We might even go so far as to suggest that his credibility as a human being within the show's fictional world is undermined as a consequence. Furthermore, the delivery of the revelation involves Frank dispatching information about his father's death that leaves little room for interpretation on the part of the viewer. We are simply told 'straight' and, so heavily marked is Spacey's delivery of the lines, we are barely asked to evaluate his bitterness in the retelling: his emotions are communicated unambiguously and bluntly. These features continue in the delivery of the final word, 'line,' with Spacey's drop in pitch becoming a somewhat caricatured display of villainy (not unlike the archetypal twirling of a moustache) because no other aspects are kept in play. The brief interaction between Press Secretary and photographer merely reasserts the already clearly-defined deception at work and, similarly, the final shot of the headstone simply re-states a fact made abundantly clear to us already. Not much can matter beyond the accomplishment of the trick.

I would propose that this sequence from season three of *House of Cards* fails, in certain respects, to achieve the kind of subtlety, complexity and nuance that I find within the equivalent scene from season one. This claim does not necessarily amount to an unequivocal dismissal of its worth: we may well find virtue in work that deliberately employs aesthetic strategies that are neither subtle, complex nor nuanced. Likewise, a television show is entitled to change style and tone (a more erratic and looser employment of direct address, for instance, might mark a new direction, connecting perhaps with Frank becoming less controlled and more reckless). However, Perkins' articulation of credibility, shape and significance provides an available means with which to explore a set of contentions, and to think through the wider ramifications of the shortcomings that I felt existed. In striving for a particular dramatic effect, the season three sequence falls short of developing significant relationships between its elements and, at the same time, undermines those elements' credibility within the fictional world. The 'two equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance' that Perkins describes require careful effort, not only because they work against each other but also because *both* are evidently at risk in any mishandling. Making unequivocal connections with Perkins' work is, I maintain, helpful in working through responses to the two sequences – why one might seem more accomplished than the other, for example – but also to place an awareness of their qualities within a wider conceptual framework. Perkins' criticism provides tools that can be taken up and used in Television Studies as we develop our responses to shows and, in the case of *House of Cards*, his concepts of credibility, shape and significance are especially useful for considering how these features can be made to withstand pressure within a *particular* television context: the long-running serial drama. Perhaps *House of Cards* does not collapse because the opening to season three can be viewed as inferior to the opening to season one in certain ways. But the disparity between them, I would argue, illustrates the potential strain that can emerge as the hours of screen time stack up across seasons, at least focussing our attention upon how individual shows manage that burden. (And, very specifically, how this particular show handles the consistent use of a bold aesthetic device – direct address – over time.) This, in turn, has implications for our wider evaluation of television texts: a claim for overall excellence (or, indeed, fallibility) may require qualification if there are distinct variations in achievement across episodes and seasons. A robust, extended, evaluative account of *House of Cards* could consider these two sequences in the context of the show as a whole, weighing up whether they are indicative of its overall quality (and, in terms of my tentative suggestions in this article, the extent to which they might even be symptomatic of a decline).

## Perkins and television

It is my hope that the benefits of incorporating Perkins' ideas might help to counteract certain anxieties that can emerge, and which I've referenced briefly, regarding the status of Television Studies in relation to Film Studies. Indeed, I would claim that Perkins' writing can illuminate our thinking about television, for the reasons laid out in my discussion, and that acknowledging this can help to advance critical understanding. At the same time, I am mindful that we should retain choice in the critical methods we seek to apply, and I hope it is clear that I am not advocating a wholesale integration of Perkins' work in

the field of Television Studies at the expense of anything else. Likewise, it must be the case that we can decide whether the tools available best fit the job we are attempting and, indeed, the work we are engaging with. To my mind, his concepts of credibility, significance and shape help to clarify a series of qualities found in sequences from *House of Cards*. It is important, however, to reflect upon the congruence of these ideas within the study of television and to consider, in detail, any implications in applying work across disciplines. Certainly, further opportunities within Perkins' critical output exist. I have chosen only a few, albeit well-known, passages from *Film as Film* to help focus a set of ideas and, as a result, it is not difficult to recommend that there would be value in returning to that book (and, indeed, Perkins' other published work) to consider further incorporations of his writing within our critical and conceptual appreciation of television. [14]

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## Notes

[1] A version of this article was presented at the 'Film as Film Today: On the Criticism and Theory of V.F. Perkins' Symposium, Warwick University, UK, 4-5 September 2018. I am grateful to the many attendees who responded to the paper on the day and subsequently helped to shape its development. I would also to like to thank Sarah Cardwell, who generously read an earlier draft of this article, and Andrew Klevan, for his meticulous and insightful editorial feedback.

[2] Equally, I would not want to suggest that Perkins was oblivious to television. From conversations with him, I know this was certainly not the case and, in the pages of *Movie*, he contributed to the television-focussed interview articles on *Upstairs, Downstairs* (LWT, 1971-75) (Barr, Hillier and Perkins, 1975) and the writer E.A. Whitehead (Perkins and Pye, 1977).

[3] This description of Perkins' writing is barely adequate. I am therefore very grateful that Douglas Pye's superb collection *V.F. Perkins on Movies: Collected Shorter Film Criticism* exists, which brings together all of Perkins' shorter critical pieces for the first time and thus familiarises the reader comprehensively with the positions Perkins adopted and the methods he employed. (Pye 2020).

[4] Perkins' approach, certainly, but it is worth noting that it was shared by others, such as his fellow *Movie* editors. Ian Cameron, for example, provides a strong defence of close scrutiny in the second issue of the magazine as he lays out *Movie*'s editorial position: 'For talking about one small section of a film in small detail, whether in an interview or in an

article, we have been accused of fascination with technical trouvailles at the expense of meaning. The alternative which we find elsewhere is a gestalt approach which tries to present an overall picture of the film without going into "unnecessary" detail, and usually results in giving almost no impression of what the film was like for the spectator.' (1962: 4).

[5] Although not following the same format as *Close-Up*, Gibbs and Pye have since edited a further series of books, *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television* (2013-), that make detailed analysis a central critical focus.

[6] *Disclosure of the Everyday* is dedicated to the close reading of films but it is also a work of film philosophy, with the writing of Stanley Cavell a guiding influence alongside Perkins.

[7] Before the publication of *Reading Buffy*, Thomas' critical writing had been – to the best of my knowledge – located exclusively in Film Studies. Her excellent books *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (2000) and *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film* (2001) consistently demonstrate a dedication to the close scrutiny of film style.

[8] It should be emphasised, however, that Cardwell's work in television aesthetics does not derive from a Film Studies background at all. Indeed, in an email conversation I conducted with Cardwell, she identifies two broad groups in television aesthetics that became more clearly defined from the turn of the century onwards and, subsequently, aligned with each other over time: 'film-based, very much concerned with the practice of close analysis' and 'a smaller grouping who were more of a conceptual (analytic) philosophical bent' (Cardwell 2022). Cardwell places herself in the second camp.

[9] Jacobs' article is wide-ranging and, as a consequence, has been influential in several areas of Television Studies. However, its explicit and detailed engagement with, indeed, issues of judgement and value makes it a crucial influence (arguably, *the* crucial influence) within the move towards television aesthetics that occurred from the turn of the century onwards.

[10] Sarah Cardwell makes reference to the scarcity of aesthetics-centred work she experienced when she was planning a television aesthetics course in 2000, as part of a key article that sets out in detail the features and foci of television aesthetics (2006: 72).

[11] The publication of *Film as Film* coincided with the growing influence of *Screen* theory, which Robert B. Ray identifies as an antithesis to the underlying principles found in *Movie* (2020: 35-51). Ray weaves a consideration of *Film as Film* into his discussion of the *Screen* / *Movie* divide and it is not difficult to appreciate, given the strong influence of *Screen* theory which he describes, that Perkins' work did not fit the dominant fashions of the time.

[12] Although my contention here is that *Film as Film* can provide crucial guidance for thinking about this sequence from *House of Cards*, it would be a little odd to neglect mentioning that Perkins considers direct address specifically in his essay, 'Where is the World?' He discusses the ending of *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955) and uses the moment of Rachel (Lillian Gish) speaking directly to camera to pursue its relationship to the film as a whole, and its implications for our understanding of fictional worlds in cinema. One passage that, I think, marks a particular continuity with Perkins' concept of credibility in *Film as Film*, and which has pertinence to the concerns of this article, is as follows: 'If we insist too much on reason here we shall divorce criticism from experience. It is normal for a movie to stress and sustain the separation between the fictional world and the world of the viewer. Imagination allows the movie to work within that register. But imagination makes other registers available as well. In one such, a world may be suggested whose beings can respond to our watching. In another, the film may have its actors step aside from their character roles and move apart from the fictional world so as to appear or address or confront us in their own right.' ( [2005] 2020: 293). I would maintain that Perkins' assertions here can be applied profitably within a consideration of television drama.

[13] For reasons of economy, I have omitted two exposition shots of the motorcade approaching the cemetery from my account of this sequence.

[14] I have, for instance, relied upon the terms 'credibility,' 'shape' and 'significance' from *Film as Film* to suit some specific points I wanted to explore and clarify regarding *House of Cards*. I should concede, however, that this selection is also a narrowing (although I hope not a misrepresentation of the arguments), as these concepts do not stand alone in Perkins' book, and fuller consideration would profitably incorporate others like 'balance,' 'unity' and 'coherence,' which are central to his critical contentions, and closely related to 'credibility,' 'shape' and 'significance.'