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The effects of manipulative rhetoric in Kevin Spacey's "Let Me Be Frank" YouTube video

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Abstract: This article focuses on Kevin Spacey's manipulative rhetoric in the YouTube video he posted on Christmas Eve in 2018 when he was facing a felony sexual assault charge in Nantucket District Court in USA. Drawing upon the notion of "double deixis" used for the second-person pronoun, this article questions the extent to which Spacey's use of the first-person pronoun could be called "doubly deictic". The findings show that Spacey's strategic use of deixis allows him to blur identities and conflate fictional and real worlds. Not only is he using deixis in a way that hampers easy interpretation and complicates cognitive projection but he assigns his audience an awkward double positioning (as fans and citizens). The article also tries to elucidate the complex effects of Spacey's manipulation on viewers. It suggests an addition to the notion of "double consciousness" that malfunctions here, as a "third consciousness" seems to be imposed onto the audience. This may explain why certain viewers are likely to experience some "cognitive dissonance" while watching this video that the media has defined as "creepy".

Keywords: cognitive; deictic; dissonance; double consciousness; double deixis; manipulation; reception; third consciousness

1 Introduction

The article aims at studying the actor Kevin Spacey's manipulative rhetoric in the YouTube video he posted on Christmas eve 2018¹ and elucidating its complex

¹ Spacey reiterated the same trick on Christmas Eve 2019 and 2020 (with a different format for the latter) but this article will exclusively focus on the 2018 first video when Spacey re-establishes contact with his audience after a year of absence. The second and third videos can be accessed here: <https://>

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effects on viewers. In this video, the actor seems to play his *House of Cards* TV series character again (Netflix 2013–2018). The video is entitled “Let Me Be Frank”, with a play on the word “frank” that can both be interpreted as an adjective meaning “sincere” or “outspoken” and as a proper noun in reference to his character’s name in *House of Cards* (Frank Underwood). It was released at the time when Spacey was facing a felony sexual assault charge in Nantucket District Court in USA in the light of an alleged 2016 assault of a then 18-year-old at a bar.² Between October and November 2017, more than thirty allegations of sexual misconduct had been put forward against Spacey, leading the *House of Cards* production crew to remove him from the series in November 2017 and preventing him from playing in the last season. Thus, the film crew had to make him die in the series. The report of his death is made in the last season by his wife, Claire Underwood, who takes center stage and becomes the first woman president of the United States.

Two words, among many others, have been mainly used in the media to describe the video: “creepy” and “bizarre”.³ However, journalists have not managed to explain what it was that produced such an effect. Using tools from stylistics and pragmatics, I intend to highlight what makes the video so particularly weird. I will show that Spacey uses deictic markers in such a way as to purposefully hamper easy interpretation. Person deixis in particular is more fully investigated in Section 3. The actor uses the first-person pronoun to refer to different selves pointing to different worlds, between which he goes back and forth or that he blends through “double deixis” (Herman 1994, 2002). This double stance assigns the viewers an awkward position that is further delved into in Section 4 analyzing textual reception. The final section makes a tentative theoretical addition to Phelan’s (2017) “double consciousness” in order to capture the illegitimate blurring of the worlds that Spacey is imposing onto his audience.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCuuKhjLBOQ, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6_N8uxJQ3g, last accessed 8 February 2021.

² The charges have been dropped in this case as the accusing party withdrew his suit, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/07/kevin-spacey-groping-lawsuit-dropped-dismissed. Several other allegations of sexual assaults have surrounded this charge, however. Many voices made themselves heard as regards the actor’s alleged predatory behaviour.

³ For other words, see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/28/kevin-spaceys-video-distraction-allegations-house-of-cards>, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/kevin-spacey-video-racks-up-45-million-views-1171616>, and <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2018/12/24/kevin-spacey-breaks-silence-video-faces-felony-charge-alleged-sexual-assault/2407736002/>.

2 A purposeful lack of deictic markers

In “Let Me Be Frank”, deictic terms are not easily interpretable. This, as a result, complicates cognitive projection on the part of the viewers. As is well-known, the term deixis always implies some reference to a situation of communication. An utterance like “I’ll come and see you at the hospital tomorrow” brings into play the speaking person via the deictic pronoun “I”; it is anchored in the moment of enunciation (now), and the speaker’s “tomorrow” is to be interpreted by the hearer in relation to the speaker’s “today”, that is to their temporal location. The utterance can only be interpreted in relation to the situation in which it is pronounced (Levinson 1983).

In terms of person deixis, Benveniste (1966: 232) speaks of “correlative subjectivity” with regard to the “I-you” dyad as one cannot exist without the other. There is no such thing as a “you” without an “I”. To this correlation must be added the third-person pronoun you and I can refer to (“they”, “it”, “he/she”) and their possessive and reflexive forms, but also the definite article. If I say “the man”, using the definite article, I imply that you and I know who I am referring to. Deixis also leans on what is old and new information for the person we interact with. When Auster (2006) in *Travels in the Scriptorium* for instance starts his novel with “The old man”, he presumes we know about him already, presupposing some common knowledge that cannot exist at the very beginning of a novel: “The old man sits on the edge of the narrow bed, palms spread out on his knees, head down, staring at the floor” (p. 3). This is a common strategy at the opening of novels that aims at arousing the reader’s interest.

In the literature, the speaker’s position is referred to in spatial terms: the perceptual locus of the addressor is called a “deictic centre” or “perceptual origo” (Bühler 1990 [1934]). This locus is the anchor point and all the deictic expressions are to be grasped in relation to it. We indeed have a very egocentric or logocentric conception of deictic expressions that pose the speaker (and the hearer) as the center of deixis. Therefore, all the deictic expressions will point to or start from that center. The markers that are indicative of time and place are part of what are called “temporal” and “spatial” deixis. Apart from today, yesterday, tomorrow, temporal deixis includes expressions such as “in the morning” or units of measurement like “after two years”. But tense must also be included in the temporal deixis category as tensed verbs can be helpful markers of deixis, as we will see in the piece under study. Spatial deixis includes spatial adverbs, but also verbs of motion like “come”, “go”, “bring”, as well as the demonstrative determiners and pronouns “this”, “that”, “these”, “those” (see Stockwell 2002: 45–46), the use of

which depends on the proximity to or distance from the deictic center – the distance/proximity can be either physical or psychological.

In other words, deictic expressions are the spatiotemporal coordinates that the addressee must identify in the act of utterance to make sense of what is being said, to know “the place and time from and at which the addressor speaks” (Fillmore 1997: 61). Thus, deictic terms must be quite easily interpretable by the addressees for them to relate the deictic terms to the context of the utterance or the situation alluded to. What I am going to show now is that Kevin Spacey is not helpful in that regard, leaving it to the viewers to make the right inference as he provides very few grammatical markers of deixis, apart from person deixis – but even the basic I/you dyad is problematic as we will see in Section 3. Spacey either makes deictic terms difficult to interpret or deliberately removes them from his utterances. We therefore need to understand why he is so deictically elusive.

Here is how Kevin Spacey begins his video:⁴

- (1) (*water running, character washing his hands, sighing and then looking at the camera*)

I know what you want. Oh sure they may have tried to separate us but what we have is too strong, too powerful. After all we **shared** everything you and I. I **told** you my deepest, darkest secrets, I **showed** you exactly what people are capable of, I **shocked** you with my honesty (.) but mostly I **challenged** you and made you think (pause: 1 s) and you **trusted** me (.) even though you **knew** you shouldn't. (pause: 2 s) So we're not done no matter what anyone says (.) and besides (.) *I know what you want (.) you want me back.*⁵

The text is encapsulated by the same expression marked in italics in the extract: “I know what you want”. The underlined utterances in the present tense comment on the relationship between the addressor and the addressee. In the middle, with the verbs in bold, the past tense is the only deictic cue that is given. Nowhere else can we find any explicit linguistic reference to the time and space the speaker is referring to.

This evocation of past events partakes of what Bühler (1934: 124s) calls “deixis am phantasma”, which accounts for a particular working of deixis that applies to the “field of what is absent”, i.e., the domain of the imagination, inviting the viewers to project themselves to the scene/situation the speaker is mentioning. This displacement that is asked of viewers is not explicitly deictically facilitated. It is left for them to look for the relevant context in which Spacey's words could make

⁴ The full transcription of the video as well as the list of the transcription symbols used are in Appendices A and B, respectively.

⁵ The italics, the bold and underlined phrases are added in this and all the subsequent extracts.

sense. When he says “I **told** you my deepest, darkest secrets, I **showed** you exactly what people are capable of, I **shocked** you with my honesty”, the viewer familiar with the *House of Cards* series may infer that Spacey is here referring to the character-viewer relationship they had in *House of Cards*, where the actor speaks through the fourth wall confiding his “deepest, darkest secrets”. In the absence of explicit deictic clues, this has to be inferred from the propositional meanings of the sentence. But even semantics is not helpful. The reference to the agents involved for instance is most indefinite: “I showed you exactly what **people** are capable of”, where Spacey could have used the words “politicians” instead of “people” as a less ambiguous reference to a set of fictional characters within the series. Then, the connective “so” in the utterance-initial position (So we’re not done no matter what anyone says and besides *I know what you want you want me back*) is here a discursive pointer that is part of what is called “discourse deixis”.⁶ It serves as a deictic signal bringing us back to the time of the utterance marked by the present tense.

The vagueness of reference goes even further in the sentence following extract (1):

- (2) Of course some believed everything. They’re just waiting with bated breath to hear me confess it all. They’re just dying to hear me declare that everything said is true and that I got what I deserved.

The connective “of course” serves as a transition marker projecting us back to some past (“some believed”, “I got what I deserved”) but we come to understand that this projected scene is different from the previous one because it is related to processes that coincide with the moment of enunciation, as is attested by the use of aspectual forms: “They’re just waiting”, “They’re just dying to hear me confess it all”. Therefore, tense and aspectual forms are the only deictic clues along with lexical semantics – the terms “declare” “confess” “true” – leading us to infer that Spacey is now referring to judicial matters. The actors involved are no more specified, as the use of the pronoun “some” in “some believed” conceals the identity of the agents that are reduced to their indefinite quantity (some). The third-person plural pronoun “they” in “they’re just waiting with bated breath to hear me confess” anaphorically refers to this “some” without adding any new information. Lastly, the indefinite totalizing pronoun “everything” in “hear me declare that everything said is true” conceals what it is we are talking about.

Spacey therefore makes abundant use of what Kleiber (1986: 19) calls “opaque deixis”. Kleiber contrasts indexical transparency and indexical opacity, the former

⁶ “Discourse deixis is language which points to a section or aspect of the discourse context or co-text in which that language is used” (Macrae 2019: 35)

referring to indexicals that are direct and complete in the sense that they have a unique possible referent in the utterance in which they occur (the most transparent deictics being I, here, now for instance). In contrast, opaque deixis includes demonstratives and third-person pronouns like “he”, “them” or other indexicals that are fundamentally incomplete and indirect, in the sense that their enunciation does not – on their own – guarantee the elucidation of their referents. The interpreter needs to draw from the spatio-temporal environment of the utterance to be able to identify the referent.

Spacey thus muddles reference by using opaque deictic markers, preferring markers that are only “partially deictic” such as the definite article: “Personal and demonstrative pronouns are wholly and inherently deictic in function, while the definite article and definite referring expressions are more occasionally and/or partially deictic in function” (Macrae 2019: 43). A brief example will serve to show that the definite article is both opaque and low on the deictic scale as it only indirectly anchors the noun phrases it determines in an identified situation:

- (3) Anyhow despite all **the** poppycock, **the** animosity, **the** headlines, **the** impeachment without a trial. Despite everything [...] I feel surprisingly good.

Viewers can only elucidate the referent of the noun phrases determined by the partially deictic definite article (“the”) by calling upon external knowledge that the speaker presupposes the viewer has *a priori*. The definite article conveniently enables Spacey to remain vague about the animosity or the headlines in question.

But even transparent person deixis, the first and second-person pronoun indexing speaker and hearer, becomes obscure in Spacey’s speech, as illustrated in the next section.

3 Toggling and blending deixis

Having a referential value that shifts with every new speaker, the I/you pronouns are what Jakobson (1984: 42), after Jespersen (1923), calls “shifters”.⁷ To put it bluntly, there are as many “I”s as there are speakers who say “I”. The reference can therefore never be established once and for all since it varies with each new speaker. But normally when the same person uses “I” throughout a speech for instance, the referent remains stable as it keeps indexing the very same speaker. However, Spacey uses the same personal pronoun to index different selves in his video – both that of a character in a text-world (Frank) and an identity in a discourse-world (Mr Spacey, the citizen). I’m using the distinction made in Text

7 Benveniste (1966: 253) speaks of “embrayeurs” in French.

World Theory between a discourse-world to which the participants that surround the speech event belong and the text-world⁸ which corresponds to the mental representations the reader makes of the world being described (Gavins 2007: 9).

This double identity reference seems to be an effect of a “doubly deictic” first-person pronoun. For instance, doubly deictic “I” is crucial for participants in digital fiction (interactive fiction or video games) where the readers-players are doubly situated: they are both the “I” reader/viewer of the discourse-world playing the video game or responding to the digital fiction and the character/actor cut into it. Bell et al. (2018), for example, show that when asked to comment on Andy Campbell and Judi Alston’s digital fiction installation WALLPAPER they took part in, participants tend to use “I” both to refer to themselves as discourse-world participants but also as text-world characters acting as if they were the ones going through the different spaces in the game. Here is their definition of the “doubly-deictic I”: “a doubly-deictic ‘I’ is used when a participant refers to both I-as-character and I-as-reader player at the same time and thus signals double-situatedness” (Bell et al. 2018: 11).

The authors model their “doubly deictic I” on Herman’s (1994) “doubly deictic you”, that appears in narratives written in the second person. The reference of “you” becomes ambiguous as it seems to be able to refer to two entities addressed by “you”, both an internal reference in the text and a possible address to the reader. On processing this ambiguous ‘you’, the reader finds herself “more or less subject to conflation with the fictional self addressed by *you*” (Herman 2002: 345). Herman speaks of “doubly deictic you”, when it is hard for the reader to pinpoint the exact reference of the second person as it seems to function “as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles, one internal to the storyworld represented in or through the diegesis and the other(s) external to that storyworld” (Herman 2002: 343). He uses the term of “hybridized combination” (p. 345).

Spacey appears, however, to go back and forth between the two worlds, by juxtaposing rather than “superimposing” them. The different “I”s appear in different phrases or sentences and their references can be disentangled through inference. In the following extract where present and past tense are enmeshed, I could disentangle the two worlds by adding my own interpretation [in brackets] of what Spacey is referring to:

- (4) Because I can promise you this. If **I** didn’t pay the price for the things we both know I did do [IN FICTION], **I**’m certainly not going to pay the price for the things I didn’t do [IN LIFE].

⁸ Phelan and Herman use the term “storyworld” instead of “text-world” in their reference to the diegetic world. See quotations from both authors below.

It could therefore be concluded from this that Spacey creates a pool of identities more than he produces a unique, simultaneously ambiguous “I”.

Likewise in extract (5) Spacey seems to allude to one world after the other:

- (5) **Anyhow (.) despite all the poppycock, the animosity, the headlines, the impeachment without a trial, despite everything (.) despite even my own death, I feel surprisingly good (.) and my confidence grows each day that soon enough, you will know the full tru ...** (pause: 2 s) Wait a minute (pause: 2 s), now that I think of it (pause: 2 s), you never actually SAW me die, did you?

The actor refers to the discourse-world in “despite all the poppycock”/“my confidence grows each day that soon enough you will know the full tru ...”, highlighted in bold. Additionally, he refers to the text-world, or his role as character in it, in “despite my own death/you never actually saw me die”, highlighted in the underlined sentences. Within one single sentence beginning with the same subordinating conjunction, he thus puts on a par his “impeachment without a trial” in life and his fictional death in art. We, as viewers, are invited to “toggle” (Gavins 2007) back and forth between the two worlds in the parallel “despite” sentences.

But on closer inspection, the toggling between different identities (“I” as Spacey, “I” as Underwood) can become more blurred. In extract (6), he seems to be asking us to consider his two selves simultaneously as part of the same life/art world:

- (6) I mean if you and I have learnt nothing else these past years, is that **in life and art** nothing should be off the table, we weren’t afraid, not of what we said, not of what we did and we’re still not afraid.

Spacey is mixing both worlds to the point of making it hard to separate one from the other. By inviting us to consider *House of Cards* as art, he seems to be placing it within a bigger context in which the frontier between life and art dissolves.

In the extract below, already quoted at the beginning of the article, “I” appears in fact to be the result of a “hybridized combination” between his discourse-world actual self and his text-world virtual self. Pinpointing the exact reference of the “I” is indeed more difficult than it may seem:⁹

⁹ I want to thank the anonymous reviewer who made this excellent suggestion to me.

- (7) After all we shared everything you and I. I told you my deepest, darkest secrets, I showed you exactly what people are capable of, I shocked you with my honesty (.) but mostly I challenged you and made you think (pause: 1 s) and you trusted me (.) even though you knew you shouldn't.

Spacey's reference to him, having told the viewer his “deepest, darkest secrets” and having shown “what people are really capable of”, hints at a blurring of the worlds in a disturbing way – he seems to be referring to himself as Underwood and the viewers as the show's audience, but given the context, there is a suggestion that there is some kind of parallel with Spacey himself. He may be confessing to having such secrets and pointing to what “people are capable of” in the discourse-world. The double reference ambiguously overlaps in the parallel he seems to be establishing here. The indefiniteness of the word “people” mentioned in Section 2 contributes to the possibility of the blending.

The actor thus conflates the two worlds that are (manipulatively) united through the use of the same first-person pronoun, which is meant to destabilize the I-you dyad. These juxtaposed or blended identity references render the “you” position problematic since it assigns the viewer a double positioning as well. The doubly deictic “I” addresses some “you”, whose reference is also bound to waver between the faithful viewers of *House of Cards* or the fans of the actor, and the citizens in the know of Kevin Spacey's judiciary issues. The position from which “I” speaks varies too much for the audience to easily project themselves into the “you” slot. What is the purpose of such deictic wavering and confusion? In juxtaposing or blending different referents for the deictic “I”, Spacey can shift the audience's attention from one world to the next or invite them to consider the two worlds simultaneously, distracting them from focusing on the facts – that he never puts forward. Indeed, instead of defending his case with his own arguments and truth, he confines himself to reminding the viewer of their intimate relationship:

- (8) Oh sure they have tried to separate us but what we have is too strong, too powerful
- (9) After all we shared everything you and I
- (10) Only **you and I** both know it's never that simple, not in politics and not in life
- (11) I mean if **you and I** have learnt nothing else these past years



The use of the plural pronoun “we” or the coordinated phrase “you and I” has the effect of taking his feelings and that of the audience for granted. Spacey takes “the

right to speak for the addressee” (De Cock 2011). He is trying to divide and conquer his audience, separating worthy smart viewers from gullible others who would “judge without evidence”. In the following sentence, “you wouldn’t rush to judgment without facts, would you? Did you? No, not you. You’re smarter than that”, he seems to want to get the audience on his good side by flattering their intelligence. Spacey is asking for their unbroken support by reminding them of why they have always been fond of him: “Like I ever played by anyone’s rules before. I never did and you LOVED it”.

4 Viewers’ (potential) reactions

How are the viewers likely to react to Spacey’s attempt at forcing a comeback upon them whether they want it or not? In her study of digital fiction in which the reader/viewer is addressed as “you”, Bell (2022) distinguishes between the “authentics” and the “rejecters”. The former are those that willingly occupy the “you” position while the rejecters refuse to self-ascribe as addressees. Some of Spacey’s audience members may be authentics in Bell’s (2022) sense in that they fully engage with the video, siding with the actor and considering themselves the “smarter” ones who know better than to judge on appearances. Others may reject the video altogether – among them may be those who overtly voice their disapproval through the dislike sign.¹⁰ In my own theoretical apparatus (see Sorlin 2022), the authentic is tantamount to what I call “the engaged viewer”,¹¹ who unreservedly occupies the “you” slot. By contrast, the “distanced viewers” are those who have watched the video but refuse to accept the “you” position, maybe because they do not like being bullied into wanting him back or because they feel that they should not condone what is being said by someone who is currently facing charges.

However, the picture may be more blurred. Taking on his fictional identity, Spacey also plays on the popularity of his unfearing, bold character that so many people rooted for in the series “even though you knew you shouldn’t”. Spacey’s words may sow doubts in a third category of viewers who may fall for the fearless attitude that they loved so much in the series and that he is taking up here: “we weren’t afraid no matter what anyone says, no matter what we did and we’re still not afraid”. In between engaged and distanced readers, there is space for those

¹⁰ There are nearly four times as many likers as dislikers to date of Spacey’s YouTube video. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZveA-NAIDI>  284K  75K , last accessed February 2021.

¹¹ I’m using these labels in echo of Warhol’s dichotomy between engaging and distancing narrators (see Sorlin 2022; Warhol 1989, 1995).

among the audience members who may be intrigued by Spacey/Underwood’s rhetoric, as he is both flattering them through distinction in the video (“no not you, you’re smarter than that”) and demanding continued allegiance in the name of shared (fictional) history: “Like I ever played by anyone’s rules before. I never did and you loved it”. These audience members would be part of what I call “distantly engaged viewers,”¹² that include those who are not sure how to respond to the video. These viewers may find it hard to resolve the cognitive discomfort – what Festinger (1957) calls “cognitive dissonance” – that Spacey creates in them, torn as they may be between their liking of the actor/character and their knowing of his alleged immoral acts.

Here are a few comments posted at different times after the release of the video that I have taken from the comments section below the YouTube video. In February 2021, there were 46,948 comments on a video that got 12,490,445 views. The “engaged viewer” either responds as a fan of *House of Cards* or a fan of the actor, defending Spacey against the Hollywood conspiracy of which he is but a victim:

- (12) Not gonna lie, House of Cards sucks without Frank Underwood (kongfeet81 two years ago)
- (13) This is already far better than Season 6 🤔🤔👍👍 (Sweet’nSalty Unboxing, two years ago)
- (14) Frank Underwood, I miss you so much 😊 (Pinar Kocadere 9 months ago)
- (15) Bravo! Innocent!!! YES WE MISS YOU. Your incredible acting, your humor, your impressions. You’re too good for these sleazy people making false accusations. 🙏 (Maureen, one month ago)
- (16) I am such a huge fan of this man. I miss him. Spacey’s story needs to be COMPLETELY told. (Jeanae Rowley 5 months ago)
- (17) You are amazingly fantastic!!! You conquered the film industry! It is the ONLY reason why “they” want to destroy you. TOO LATE. You have already reached the highest level! 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌 I bow to you 🙏 (Luna Bella 1 month ago)¹³

¹² Bell (2022) also envisages a third category in her study of the Blast Theory’s app-fiction *Karen* that she calls the “role-players”.

¹³ All the comments to the video are retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZveA-NAIDI>, last accessed 8 February 2021.

There are very few “distanced viewers” who clearly indicate their rejection of the video. Those who leave a comment are mostly those who have liked the video or some aspects of it. The distanced viewers tend to comment on some unease generated by the video: “this scare me to the bone” (Andrés Rocco 10 months ago) or “When you realize what he’s actually talking about and who he’s talking to this is pretty disturbing” (Kincaid Gimore 1 month ago). What we have instead is the mixed feelings voiced by the “distanced engaged viewer”:

(18) Hes creepy as hell but man this dude is such a good actor. I’m conflicted (DragonCry48 2 years ago)

(19) I really don’t know how to feel about this. (Ethan Moses 1 month ago)

Commentators often focus on the talent of the actor in their posts. It is my contention that focusing on the actor’s performance is a way to resolve the cognitive dissonance they may experience. Here are a few more examples:

(20) I just want him to be in movies again. (Filozica Luve 7 months ago)

(21) so just saying, as an actor this guy is amazing! (Sylphan 5 months ago)

(22) hes such a good actor (lino248 9 months ago)

Underlining and applauding the actor’s performance in the show is a way to transcend the double positioning – as a viewer of *House of Cards* and as a citizen. These comments may also be a response to the actor’s invitation to consider his performance within the broader, blending context of “life and art” (see Section 3). Highlighting the performance is a way to defocus the content of what the actor is saying and remain thereby comfortable with it.

Yet even the performance itself is disorientating. This is best captured in one viewer’s comment evincing that there is something deeply disruptive in the video:

(23) Now I realize. Kevin Spacey isn’t Frank Underwood. Frank Underwood is Kevin Spacey. (Bruno Cerqueira Cestari 2 years ago)

As the final section demonstrates, Spacey is illegitimately blurring the lines between ontological planes, authorizing himself through the usurpation of a fictional role.

5 Blurring ontological planes

The video is framed as fictional (there is a cliffhanger music at the end) and Kevin Spacey invites us to see Frank Underwood in him. Yet as we saw, if he plays his

character role in a video he wants us to perceive as fictional, his actual identity in the discourse-world transpires all the more so as he alludes to discourse-world events. Besides he makes actor’s comments on his character’s death in *House of Cards*. We could therefore speak of a triple situatedness of Spacey – as character, actor and citizen.

In my view, this calls for an addition to Phelan’s (2018) “double consciousness” of the audience reading/viewing a fictional piece. Phelan’s rhetorical perspective distinguishes between different positioning of the audience by a text and in particular distinguishes the narrative audience position and the authorial audience position. The narrative audience are observers “within the storyworld”: “the members of the narrative audience regard the characters and events as real rather than invented, and, indeed, they accept the whole storyworld as real regardless of whether it conforms to the actual world” (Phelan 2017: 7). The authorial audience, in contrast, “has the double-consciousness that allows it to experience the events as real and to retain the tacit knowledge that they are invented” (p. 8). Usually, the flesh and blood audience immersing themselves in a fictional piece adopt the narrative audience position but are, as the authorial audience, “tacitly” aware that this is only an invented fiction. It seems to me that what Spacey is doing is asking the audience to become particularly aware of their own position as flesh-and-blood readers in the discourse-world in response to actual events, bringing them to some third awareness that is only implicit in Phelan’s (2017) schema. Through this third consciousness, the audience is indeed invited to be aware of contemporary issues in the discourse-world and respond to the piece as citizens of the world they live in.

In fact, although framed as fictional, the fictionality of the video can be highly questioned – it does not construct any real narrative audience position, as the piece makes suspension of disbelief and immersion in the video difficult or even irrelevant. There are indeed no plot, story or characters at stake. Instead of immersion, the authorial audience’s attention is brought to “the fiction’s construction” (Phelan 2017: 69–70). Phelan’s “second consciousness”, that is the awareness “that characters and events are invented” (Phelan 2018: 113), is foregrounded through the actor’s metacommenting on his character’s own fictional death in the series or on the poor quality of the ending of a great series that lost a lot with his departure:

(24) wait a minute you never actually saw me die.

(25) to think it could have been such a memorable send off.

As opposed to discourse-world face-to-face interactions, the discourse-world in a piece of fiction is inevitably split as the context of the reader/viewer may not be the

same as the context of the author, especially when several centuries separate them (see Gavins 2007: 26). Yet in his video, Spacey is bringing closer together planes that fiction usually keeps separate. Of course, fiction often plays with the fiction/reality frontier, creating “reality effects” (*effet de reel*, see Barthes 1968) when one character from the real world plays his/her own role in fiction or, conversely, “fiction effects” when for instance an actor playing a writer in fiction writes a novel in the real world under his fictional name (see Cornillon 2018: 49–69). But what Spacey offers here is a pseudo-fictional piece in the manner of *House of Cards* but one that is released outside the original series. As pointed out above in one fan’s comment in example 22 (“Frank Underwood is Kevin Spacey”), the actor is turning the glove inside out, using fiction to handle a difficult situation in the real world.

The actor’s video activates viewers’ third consciousness of their discourse-world in too obvious a manner. I am not implying that fiction never points to the real world. It can have and often has what relevance theorists call “external relevance” (Wilson 2018) for the flesh-and-blood reader. Fiction can allude to discourse-world events or call upon us to see the relevance of the fictional plot in our own world, but it usually does not point to it in such a direct way. Only does propaganda art aim at getting people to act in such a straight-forward way (see Mills 2014: 137). Is Kevin Spacey goading his audience to act on his behalf, relying on his followers to defend him? What is sure is that the actor uses a pseudo-fictional piece to re-establish contact with his viewers after a long absence, manipulatively capitalizing on their liking of him in *House of Cards* – and incidentally denigrating the 6th season.

6 Conclusion

This article has attempted to analyse Spacey’s manipulative control of his 2018 video’s narrative from production to reception. Among his manipulative tools is deixis. The use of opaque and double deixis enables him to conflate text- and discourse-worlds. By allowing himself to set on equal footing the two worlds that have different moral parameters, he is unfairly asking the audience to respond to this video in the same manner as they would respond towards the immoral character he plays in the political series.

In this YouTube video, Kevin Spacey makes the most of his artistic skills to deal with discourse-world accusations and ethical breaches. His choice to embody his fictional character’s traits and personality in this show enables him to remain clear of any true confession, let alone apologies towards the alleged victims. In this self-assured position, he seems to be towering over both fictional and judicial processes. I have argued that in order to avoid any “cognitive dissonance”, some

viewers are enticed to “distantly engage” with the video from an artistic perspective. When trying to infer which world Spacey is referring to, some other audience members may hesitate between responding as a fan or as a citizen, hence the “creepy” feel of the video.

Appendix A. The full transcript of the video

(water running, character washing his hands, sighing and then looking at the camera)

I know what you want. Oh sure they may have tried to separate us but what we have is too strong, too powerful. After all we shared everything you and I. I told you my deepest, darkest secrets, I showed you exactly what people are capable of, I shocked you with my honesty (.) but mostly I challenged you and made you think (pause: 1 s) and you trusted me (.) even though you knew you shouldn't. (pause: 2 s *character drinking from his cup*) So we're not done no matter what anyone says (.) and besides (.) I know what you want (.) you want me back.

Of course some believed everything. They're just waiting with bated breath to hear me confess it all. They're just dying to hear me declare that everything said is true and that I got what I deserved.

Wouldn't that be easy? If it was all so simple. Only you and I both know it's never than simple, not in politics and not in life. But you wouldn't believe the worst without evidence, would you? You wouldn't rush to judgment without facts, would you? (pause: 2 s) Did you? (pause: 1 s) No, not you. You're smarter than that. Anyway all this presumption made for such an unsatisfying ending (.) and to think it could have been such a memorable send off. I mean if you and I have learnt nothing else these past years, is that in life and art nothing should be off the table, we weren't afraid, not of what we said, not of what we did and we're still not afraid. (Pause: 2 s)

Because I can promise you this. If I didn't pay the price for the things we both know I did do, I'm certainly not going to pay the price for the things I didn't do. Of course they are gonna say I'm being disrespectful, not playing by the rules. Like I ever played by anyone's rules before. I never did (.) and YOU LOVED it. (pause: 1 s)

Anyhow (.) despite all the poppycock, the animosity, the headlines, the impeachment without a trial. Despite everything (.) despite even my own death, I feel surprisingly good (.) and my confidence grows each day that soon enough, you will know the full tru ... (pause: 2 s) Wait a minute (pause: 2 s), now that I think of it (pause: 2 s), you never actually SAW me die, did you? (pause: 5 s *He puts the ring he wore in House of Cards back on*) Conclusions can be so deceiving. (Pause: 3 s) Miss me?

Cliffhanger music

Appendix B. The transcription conventions used (from Bednarek 2012: 246)

(.) *slight pause*

(pause: *n* seconds) longer pause with duration noted in number of second

Capital letters strong salient emphasis

? marked rising intonation

, slightly rising intonation

. marked falling intonation

... indicates an interrupted utterance

() includes transcriber's comment

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Bionote

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