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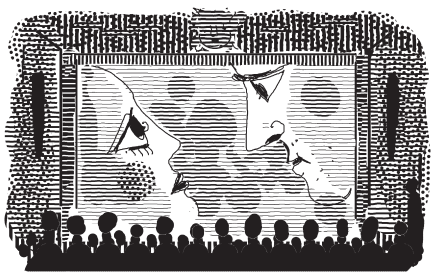
SHADOW PLAY
by Martha Bayles



Underrating Democracy

The netflix-produced tv series *House of Cards*, a remake of a 1990s British series about a scheming politician who stops at nothing to achieve the highest office in the land, is a big hit in America. This is hardly surprising, given the low esteem in which Washington is held. Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), the South Carolina Democratic congressman who together with his ice-queen wife, Claire (Robin Wright), lies, conspires, and murders his way into the Oval Office, is just the sort of genial-faced, black-hearted politician Americans love to hate.

But here's a curious fact: *House of Cards* is also a hit in China, where, unlike many U.S. films and TV shows, its primary distribution is not through piracy but through a legitimate, state-approved online channel called Sohu. Indeed, this bleak, cynical portrait of American politics debuted in China with the authorities' full blessing. And though its audience is small (the vast majority of Chinese do not watch TV online), it is also influential. Several of the show's most avid fans are high-ranking members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Media Savvy

Is this good news or bad? For the U.S. entertainment industry, the success of any American film or TV show is considered good news, because Hollywood's fondest wish is to conquer the vast, enticing Chinese market—a conquest the Chinese government is determined to prevent. Indeed, the CCP makes no secret of its long-term strategy, which is to build a Chinese entertainment industry that can not only compete with Hollywood for a share of the global market but also extend China's soft power until it becomes the world's next cultural hegemon.

Most Americans scoff at the prospect of another nation competing with us in the realm of popular culture. And with reason: the last time such a thing occurred was before World War I, when France was the world's leading producer of silent films. In 1917, the fledgling Hollywood studios began working with President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information to influence domestic opinion in favor of U.S. entry into the war, and ever since, Hollywood and Washington have cooperated to maintain American dominance of the global market for films, TV shows, and other forms of entertainment.

House of Cards, created by Beau Willimon. Netflix.

With its vast wealth and domestic audience of over 1.3 billion, China is the first—and only—nation positioned to challenge that dominance. But there is another reason why Americans scoff at the prospect: cultural production in China is under the Communist Party's strict control, and the larger the projected audience, the stricter the control. To Americans, this brings back memories of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union spent billions on cultural diplomacy (think Bolshoi Ballet), only to lose the hearts and minds of its youth to jazz and rock music. Basking in these memories, Americans assume that history will repeat itself, and no nation that suppresses the flow of creativity or (worse) channels it into propaganda, will ever be able to compete with us culturally. But the bad news is that the Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and other 21st-century authoritarian regimes are much more media-savvy than their 20th-century predecessors. They have learned to use popular culture, including American popular culture, to reinforce their grip on power.

Sparks of Freedom?

In the case of china, this means offering co-production deals to U.S. companies, then closely supervising the process so that the result is a China-friendly feature the whole family can enjoy. Personally, I'm suspending judgment until the release of *Kung Fu Panda 3*, the first animated blockbuster from the new Oriental Dreamworks studio in Shanghai.

China also allows the import of 34 foreign films a year. Most of these are American, and they are selected according to three main criteria: popularity, earning potential (China keeps 75% of the revenue), and usefulness to the Central Committee's Department of Propaganda and Thought Work. This strategy goes back to the early 1980s when the marketization policies initiated by Deng Xiaopeng led to a handful of U.S. films being introduced into what was then a tiny number of Chinese theaters.

One such was *Convoy* (1978), a late-career effort by director Sam Peckinpah, starring Kris Kristofferson as "Rubber Duck," a redneck-hippie trucker who leads a spontaneous revolt against a crooked, racist sheriff in the Arizona desert. Inspired (if that is the word)

by a 1975 country and western hit song by the same name, *Convoy* is a cheesy, raucous mess whose only claim to timeliness is its highlighting of Citizens' Band (C.B.) radio as the hot new social medium of the time.

I heard about *Convoy* from a professor at a leading Chinese university, who speculated that it had been selected because of its low cost, sloppy production values (which make Hollywood look bad), and—most important—portrayal of America as a place where hard-working dudes like Rubber Duck are oppressed by corrupt and tyrannical government officials. Did this negative portrayal have the desired effect? There's no way of knowing for sure, but the professor was convinced it had.

That isn't the whole story, however. With no prompting from me, the subject of *Convoy* came up in a subsequent conversation with a different Chinese professor. This professor, a younger man belonging to the Tiananmen Square generation, recalled seeing *Convoy* as a teenager and being thrilled by its portrayal of a working stiff who goes wherever he wants, does whatever he wants, and beats the crap out of any uniformed thug who tries to stop him.

From this perspective, *Convoy* looks pretty good. Indeed, it resembles the rebellious rock music that helped to topple the Berlin Wall. Raw, individual freedom—the gut-level urge to break loose, kick over the traces, and light out for the territory—has long been a staple of American expressive culture, from Walt Whitman to Mark Twain, from Jack Kerouac to the latest road movie. So any fair assessment of *House of Cards* in China would include the possibility that, like *Convoy*, it is a double-edged sword, showing America in a bad light but also igniting sparks of freedom.

Propaganda Ministry

For evidence of the latter possibility, we need look no further than Sina Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. According to English-language reports, there were several postings on that and other Chinese social media praising *House of Cards* and marveling at the fact that American TV producers have the freedom to create unflattering portraits of high government officials. As one user wrote, "I'm just amazed that their propaganda ministry isn't mad about this!"

Perhaps another user weighed in with the information that America does not have a ministry of propaganda, followed by someone else noting that U.S. citizens cannot be harassed, arrested, or imprisoned for referring to politicians as a bunch of lying, scheming, murdering SOBs. Perhaps these comments led to a lively discussion of the merits of liberal democracy versus authoritarianism. If so, the discussion did not last long. Or if it did, it was only by speaking in code and jumping from site to site in an effort to elude China's thousands of online censors.

Censorship is only one of the ways in which the Chinese authorities monitor the internet. They also flood social media with state propaganda disguised as friendly chatter. And they deploy the same technology that allows advertisers to target Facebook users based on products they "like" or purchase, to target citizens based on the ideas they express online. Those users who persist in posting forbidden ideas have a way of disappearing.

In America, by contrast, the media erupt in righteous indignation at the thought of being spied on by the government, and leftists make common cause with libertarians against the smiley-face intrusiveness of corporations like Facebook and Google. Without diminishing the threats posed to American citizens by powerful organizations wielding state-of-the-art digital tools, I would point out that we have not yet reached the point of being intimidated into silence.

The Macbeth of Capitol Hill

You wouldn't know this from watching *House of Cards*. It depicts an America in which the machinations of the rich and powerful are hidden from all but a few intrepid journalists. One of these is Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), a diminutive blogger who coaxes Frank Underwood into a deal trading scoops for leaks. After the requisite dreary sex, the deal goes sour when two of Zoe's former colleagues at the fictional *Washington Herald* uncover evidence linking Frank to the blackmail and murder of Peter Russo, a troubled political protégé who becomes a liability.

At this point, Zoe and her colleagues meet the dire fate of all American journalists who dare to expose the crimes and abuses of the powerful: Zoe falls to her death under a Metro subway train, her colleague Lucas disappears into a shadowy American gulag, and the other colleague Janice is cowed into quitting journalism. Behind it all stands Frank Underwood, the Macbeth of Capitol Hill, whose bloody deeds now include two murders—for it is he who sneaks into that (badly simulated) Metro station and pushes Zoe in front of the train! No wonder a Chinese netizen commented, "After watching *House of Cards*, I see that the U.S. is also very dark. It's the same everywhere."

No, dear netizen, it's not the same everywhere. *House of Cards* portrays America as

full of greedy, ambitious people more intent upon ruining one another than on governing the country. But what else is new? Americans don't need a TV show to reveal the messiness of democratic politics. Our system of government is based on the fact that, as James Madison observed, human beings are naturally "disposed to vex and oppress each other." What *House of Cards* does *not* show is the difference between liberal democracy, which has built-in safeguards against the "unfriendly passions" of human beings, and authoritarianism, which does not.

Some of the checks and balances built into the U.S. Constitution are hinted at in *House of Cards*. Despite Zoe's unfortunate end and Frank's use of the press to attack his rivals, the series does not come right out and say that the U.S. media are officially censored. And despite Frank's meteoric, and unelected, rise to the White House (the former majority whip is tapped for the vice presidency and then sworn in when the president resigns), the separate branches of government are shown as acting independently. But none of this really matters, because *House of Cards* also shows these safeguards to be flimsy and easily manipulated by Frank and the rival billionaires (including a maverick plutocrat from China) who constitute his real power base.

It's not surprising the program resonates in China, where a semblance of checks and balances are in place, but have no tradition behind them and are easily bypassed by a small group of rich and powerful people at the helm of a shadowy, pervasive police state. Perhaps this is why *China Daily* reassured its readers that in spite of the maverick plutocrat character, *House of Cards* is not unflattering to China but presents "a strong diatribe against the political system in the U.S."

Planet Hollywood

The American political system is in trouble these days. And the good people at Netflix have every right to portray that trouble in creepy conspiratorial colors that appeal to a popular audience. But the rest of us should not mistake this portrait for the truth. The real reasons for today's political dysfunction are almost totally absent from *House of Cards*, just as the real reasons for the 2008 financial crisis are missing from Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

Compare the earlier version of *House of Cards* with the new one, and you will see the difference between a brilliant black comedy created by people intimate with the workings of the British government, and a pretentious pseudo-tragedy made by people who have at best a shallow, clichéd grasp of American politics. Beau Willimon, the "creator" of the Netflix show—an odd designation, given the fact that it is based on another TV series based on a trilogy of novels—is a playwright whose political experience consists of having worked as a campaign volunteer for Charles Schumer and a paid intern for Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bill Bradley, and Howard Dean. Michael Dobbs, the author of the original novels, spent 40 years as a Conservative Party advisor, speechwriter, chief of staff, and deputy party chair under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and is now a life peer in the House of Lords.

As for Willimon's colleagues, they include some very talented denizens of Planet Hollywood. But unfortunately, that planet does not afford a very clear view of the Potomac. For example, the U.S. version of *House of Cards* ignores the difference between the American political system, in which presidential candidates must win the support not only of fellow politicians but also of the voting public in state primaries, and the British one, in which candidates for prime minister are chosen by party insiders in Parliament before being presented to the public.

Thus, the U.K. *House of Cards* shows its lead, Francis Urquhart (Ian Richardson), becoming prime minister after a fierce intraparty battle that can, with some stretching, be likened to the deadly court intrigues of *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. Indeed, the screenwriter for the BBC series, Andrew Davies, was thinking of these villains when he added all the sly "asides" in which Urquhart confides his true intentions to the audience. The American version borrows the device but misses the larger point, which is that not even the most ruthless member of Congress can maneuver his way into the White House without at some point being exposed to the scrutiny of the electorate. To be sure, the writers twist, turn, and torture the plot to make such an outcome appear possible—but they do not make it plausible.

Except, perhaps, to viewers in China. "As corrupt as D.C. may now be," writes Bill Bishop, editor of the influential newsletter *Sinocism*, "it's not nearly as bad as the show depicts it.... Millions of Chinese may come away thinking that U.S. politics are not that much cleaner than those systems closer to home." When the American entertainment industry sends a message like this, it does more than pander to the political malaise of its domestic audience. It also plays into the hands of people who truly agree with Frank Underwood's throwaway line: "Democracy is so overrated!"