Introduction

This chapter addresses a genre that has become increasingly successful in recent years: TV soap operas dealing with politics and the actions of politicians, such as *The West Wing*, *Borgen*, *House of Cards*, *In the Thick of it*, *Yes Minister*, and *Im Kanzleramt*. Even more recently, *UKIP: The first 100 Days* presents the viewer with a scenario of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) winning the British national elections 2015 – and the possible consequences of such an event. What all these political television fictions share is their portrayal of what is usually inaccessible for the wider public: the ‘backstage’ of politics (Wodak 2015, 2011, 2010, 2009; Wodak & Forchtner 2014; Corner, Richardson & Perry 2012; van Zoonen & Wring 2012; Holly 2008; Corner & Pels 2003).

By turning to the far-less strategically planned and polished backstage of contemporary politics (at least in comparison to the thoroughly manufactured frontstage), this genre represents what is assumed, presupposed or even (half)known about the everyday life of politicians, about their private lives, their advisers and spin-doctors, possible scandals or conflicts, as well as the strategies and processes of political problem-solving (cf. Crawley 2006; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles 2006; Challen 2001). As van Zoonen and Wring (2012, p. 265) rightly suggest, these modern dramas ‘function as a source of political imagination and understanding, complementing or even contrasting with the standard sources that journalism offers’.

This is arguably at least one of the reasons why the media have started to recreate the backstage via films, soap operas, and other media, in order to satisfy the widespread demand, as expressed in opinion polls and surveys, to know more about how decisions are taken, how politicians live, and what their everyday lives might consist of, that is, what ‘doing politics’ might mean and imply. By providing an apparent window into the ‘realities behind politics’, such programmes construct a proximity that allows viewers to relate more closely to politics and politicians. In other words: emotionalisation, personalisation, aestheticisation, decreased distance and dramatisation all allow for easy identification and comprehensibility by the audience. Citizens and viewers disillusioned by present-day politics, disinformation and the so-called democratic deficit (Hay 2007) are thus offered
more-or-less suggestive representations of the backstage of politics (Wodak 2011; Goffman 1967). Such representations are, however, not without danger as the displayed worlds frequently construct heroic politicians who seem to be able to: (1) reconcile various, highly demanding requirements of modern life; (2) remain distant from any realpolitik; and/or (3) display a political world that is similar to ‘sex and crime’ scenarios, full of dirty intrigues and even murder.

Against this background, we explore the socio-cultural function/s of such fictional dramas as a form of ‘politicotainment’ (Holly 2008; Richardson 2006) by asking: how do these TV dramas represent the world of politics, and what do these narratives imply for the field of politics and our understanding of it? We assume that the worlds created in such fictional dramas – a process we label, following Wodak (2011), the fictionalisation of politics and the politicisation of fiction – provide templates for how politics is both increasingly viewed by, as well as projected to, audiences who, in this genre, encounter a reduction in complexity of real-world problems thanks to seemingly wise, benevolent or simply power-hungry politicians. What we are addressing is thus firmly rooted in the new media ecology of the twenty-first century; in particular, in the shift towards ‘media democracy’ (Pels 2003; Grande 2000), with its focus on politics in terms of media personalities.

This trend towards mediatisation of modern societies implies a fundamental change in how contemporary societies operate as various areas (politics being only one of them) are increasingly affected by the rising significance of media logic (see Hjarvard 2013). Hjarvard (ibidem, p. 17), in fact, points to politics as a sphere that has integrated the media and which, simultaneously, leads to more and more of its operations taking place via the media.

In this chapter, we first provide some theoretical background on the notions of ‘backstage and frontstage’ before introducing relevant concepts from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Reisigl & Wodak 2015; Wodak 2015, 2011) and narrative theory (Ricoeur 1992, 1984; Propp 1968). Subsequently, we turn to our empirical analysis. First, we point to The West Wing as one of the paradigmatic cases of this genre, which is centred on US President Josiah Bartlett as a largely unchallenged positive hero (Rollins & O’Connor 2003). Second, we turn to the acclaimed Danish soap Borgen, which depicts a world of coalition governments with a female Prime Minister, Birgitte Nyborg. Due to space limitations, we can only provide indicative examples instead of a thorough critical discourse analysis of the histories, marketisation and construal as brand of The West Wing and Borgen, and thus focus on the portrayal of two different types of heroes. Bartlett is presented as a wise man able to solve the huge problems of a complex world; a man with some (humanising) faults, yet much strength, a hero-type we summarise under the tag of nurturing patriarch. Nyborg, in turn, is represented as a tough, emotional, but also overstressed, ambitious and multitasking, caring politician – a leader who is described as ‘a lonely and triumphant goddess’,¹ and ‘a virtuous politician who can’t be as decent as she would like’.² She is represented as mother and partner, with personal problems, which partly emerge due to her prominent role in government. Nyborg is unexperienced, has to learn her role as decision-maker and big player, and she is forced to drop many ideals and illusions about ‘doing politics’ – we thus label her as a nurturing multitasker, both similar and different from Bartlett.

These two tags draw on insights developed by George Lakoff (2004) in the context of his concern for frames and conceptual metaphors in/and of the social world. By introducing the two frames of the ‘Nurturing Parent’ and the ‘Strict Father’, Lakoff (2004) presents an ideal–typical contrast between progressive and conservative world-views by depicting and constructing each as a style of parenting, thus conceptualising the President and government
authorities of the nation, conceptualised as a family. We believe that both Bartlett and Nyborg relate to the frame of the ‘Nurturing Parent’ – though subtle differences exist – where it is assumed that the world is basically good, or at least that the good would win, after various struggles. However dangerous and difficult the world may be at present, it can thus only become better. In this kind of family, the highest moral values are empathy and responsibility. Responsibility is critical, since being a good nurturer means being responsible not only for looking after the well-being of others, but also being responsible to ourselves so that we can take care of others. In society, nurturant morality is expressed as social responsibility. This requires co-operation rather than competition, and recognition of interdependence (Lakoff 2004, p. 6).

This frame is juxtaposed with the ‘Strict Father’, struggling in a competitive world where there are necessarily winners and losers. As children (or people) are viewed as potentially weak and bad, they have to be disciplined. Morality and success are thus linked through discipline. Punishment is required to balance the moral books: if you do wrong, you must suffer a negative consequence. ‘Strict Father’ morality thus implies a natural traditional and conservative moral order.

In our conclusion, we speculate what such globalised views and beliefs about politics and politicians might imply for people’s attitudes and opinions about politics; what are the consequences when our understandings of politics stem largely from this world of ‘fictionalised politics’?

Staging and doing politics

Most examples in media studies cast their gaze on the work and life of politicians from outside, rather than within, the world of politics. These are official genres, designed for the public (Wodak 2011). This is what Erving Goffman (1959) referred to as ‘frontstage’ where actors perform in sanctioned public arenas, stage their work and are perceived by their various audiences. As Goffman noted:

> A correctly staged and performed character leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and not the cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman 1959, pp. 252–253)

These activities follow specific norms and rules and are ritualised, as Murray Edelman (1967) claimed in his seminal book *The symbolic use of politics*. However, in contrast to this frontstage, we rarely have access to the backstage, to the ‘politics de couloir’, the many conversations and the gossip in the corridors when politicians meet informally (Wodak 2015; Wodak et al. 2012; Krzyżanowski & Oberhuber 2007).

Backstage is where performers are present, but the wider audience is not. Here, the performers can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance; ‘the back region is the place where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course’ (Goffman 1959, p. 112). It is where facts suppressed in the frontstage and various kinds of informal actions may appear, which are not accessible to outsiders. Putting on a performance becomes a more difficult matter once a member of the
The fictionalisation of politics

audience is backstage. Politicians would not want to be seen by a member of the public practising a speech or being briefed by an adviser. The backstage is completely separate from the frontstage. No members of the audience can or should appear in the back. The actors adopt many strategies to ensure this; thus, access is controlled by gatekeepers (for example, visitors to the European Parliament are issued with special ‘backstage entrance passes’, which must be worn visibly, like an identification card).

Backstage, we need to stress, is a relative concept; it exists only in relation to a specific audience, at a specific time and in a specific place. In its truest sense, there can almost never be a genuine access ‘behind the scenes’. Moreover, the media have created specific cinematic devices linking frontstage and backstage; usually by introducing long corridors that lead from one location to the next (for example from a backstage room to the frontstage press conference). Advisers accompany politicians, running to a specific event and briefing them on the way, which is a specific sub-genre termed ‘walk-and-talk’ (Wodak 2011). The walk-and-talk scenes not only link front- and backstage; they establish hierarchies of knowledge and information (who talks about what to whom; who is informed about what and is allowed to pass on information to whom; who briefs whom; who addresses which topics; and so forth). In this way, walk-and-talk scenes establish the social order in the White House team, set the agenda, deliver important knowledge on events and social relations, and create a sense of urgency, of ‘doing’, of the immediate fast working of politics and political decision-making.3

Although the media focus primarily on the kind of ‘grand politics’ well documented in Edelman (1967), its more recent preoccupation with the cult of celebrity has led to interest in the private lives of politicians (Talbot 2007). Thus, private lives are perceived as newsworthy and scandalised, while news stories try to plot the genesis of important political decisions, searching for intrigues and conspiracies, especially at times of crisis or controversy (Brennan 2015; Klarer 2015; Ming 2015; Eriksson 2013; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013; Machin 2006; Richardson & Corner 2012). And as journalists and the media do not have access to the ‘politics de couloir’, to the backstage and everyday life of politicians and their advisers, rumours and speculations find fertile ground in contemporary 24/7 news cycles.

Our natural curiosity for this unknown realm perhaps accounts for the popularity of other media forms that use an alternative, fictional route by which to represent and construct the everyday lives of politicians and the intricacies of decision-making: namely, films and soaps such as Yes Minister, The West Wing or Im Kanzleramt. These include culturally available repertoires, such as the Western genre in the case of The West Wing (Wright 1977). Although quite different in many ways, both The West Wing and Borgen have, for example, attracted

Figure 38.1 The West Wing advisers rushing through the corridors of the White House
millions of viewers across the globe and are arguably part of one particular genre. A ‘genre’ may be characterised, following Fairclough (1995, p. 14), as the conventionalised, more-or-less schematically fixed use of language associated with a particular activity, as ‘a socially ratified [that is, socially accepted] way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity’. Similar to Fairclough’s definition, Bakhtin (1986, p. 60) spoke already of genre in terms of ‘[e]ach separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances’. What characterises the series we are interested in, what makes such series so attractive? Which interests and needs among mass audiences are they satisfying? As Rollins and O’Connor (2003) elaborate, there is no simple answer to these questions. There are many possible factors motivating audiences to watch these programmes, ranging from simple curiosity to the identification with ‘alternative’ politics.

For example, viewers might appreciate the portrayal of politicians and their advisers as so-called normal human beings, as ‘one of us’. However, Levine (2003, p. 62) rightly states that ‘curiously, it [The West Wing] turns a blind eye to the stories of staff politics and factionalism inside the White House’. This indicates that, although politicians are depicted as emotional, irrational and ambivalent human beings, they all seem to identify with the ‘noble cause’ and rarely compete with each other or contradict each other. The West Wing thus creates an impression of peace and unity unlikely to mirror actual conditions (Podhoretz 2003). Such fiction might, however, acquire the status of reality, the case of the fictionalisation of politics, and Crawley therefore makes the interesting point that the:

lure of television is that it promises to bring a new opportunity that is as much about ‘intellectual intimacy’ as it is about emotional closeness. Intellectually, the public may recognize the players of the familiar presidential performance but what allows them to repeatedly watch the ‘soap opera’ is, in part, the hope that the next politician will make them feel better.

(Crawley 2006, pp. 128–129)

As in any representation, soaps like The West Wing and Borgen offer a specific perspective on how ‘politics is done’ for the US-American or European lay audiences (and because the series have been dubbed in many languages, also almost worldwide). However, while watching these series (and similar productions in other countries), we might ask ourselves whether or not this is the only way, or whether it is instead just one way of ‘doing politics’. Indeed, we might question whether the representation of ‘doing politics’ in soap operas does in fact resemble the ‘real’ everyday life of politics at all. In both cases, we need to ask how the media represent politics in this particular way.

Narratives and myths

Central in how stories (narrative and story are used synonymously in the following) such as these are presented are, first, a couple of concepts that capture relations between texts and discourses through which meaning arises. Intertextuality refers to the fact that all texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such links can be established in different ways: through continued reference to a topic or the main actors throughout the TV series; through reference to the same events; or by the transfer of central arguments from one text into the next. The latter process is also known as recontextualisation. By taking an argument and restating it in a new context, we first observe the process of decontextualisation,
and then, when the respective element is implemented in a new context, of recontextualisation. The element then acquires a new meaning because meanings are formed in use (Wittgenstein 1967). *Interdiscursivity*, however, indicates that discourses are linked to each other in various ways. If we define discourse as primarily topic-related, that is a discourse on a political actor, event, object or process, then a discourse on terrorism, for example, may typically refer to the topics or sub-topics of other discourses, such as religion, gender, threat, security or racism.

Second, we point to the narrative form (Bruner 1991; Ricoeur 1984) and some of its particularities in order to make sense of these series and their appeal (cf. also Forchtner 2016; Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015). Narratives enable us to depict changes or developments, in other words, the succession of events, involving the selection of events, their fore- and backgrounding, and the choice to arrange them according to the fundamental schema of beginning, middle, and ending. An event, Paul Ricoeur (1984, p. 65) claims, ‘only gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the [narrative’s] plot’. The force of narrative derives from its linear arrangement of (selected) events in a unified plotline, making the succession, the (implicit) causalities and the conclusions of the story appear natural (Ricoeur 1992, p. 142). What we want to focus on here, is the particular status of the hero in narratives – due to the fact that it is in the figure of the hero that a story becomes ‘condensed’.

This character is also one of the categories Vladimir Propp (1968) derived from his seminal analysis of folk tales.4 His thoughts on ‘the hero’ point to at least two crucial dimensions. First, heroes are always in search of, or even locked in a struggle for, something. Second, the position given to this character implies that the audience will be invited to associate/identity itself with the hero. Here, we return to Ricoeur (1992, p. 147) whose notion of narrative identity rests on the claim that ‘[i]t is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character’, that is:

> that the traits of the main hero cannot be at odds with the kind of story narrated about him. It is only heuristically [possible,] that one can separate a ‘stable’ categorical identity, which is associated with the listing of certain personality traits, from the narrative identity developed in the unfolding of the story, in order to analyze how these two are interwoven (Ricoeur, 1991).

(Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015, p. 132)

This construal of the hero relates to classical myths and sagas (Achilles, Siegfried, and many others) which have, in turn, informed meaning-making in contemporary societies. For example, Wright was able to illustrate that the genre of Wild West films fulfils important functions for American society in creating myths about the pioneers colonising and exploring the frontiers. Moreover, the simple Manichean division of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ represented by hero and villain forms a basis for the perception and interpretation of historic events where the good win and the bad lose. As we have already noted, individual texts (episodes) are embedded in a web of contexts through which the good and the bad gain their particular meaning. In line with this, Wright maintains that:

If the form of a myth as narrative is a model for making sense of experience, then the content of particular myths embodies and makes possible this model. […] The social meanings of myth may become identified with the fundamental organization of understanding by which the mind knows itself and its world. For this reason, it is apparent that if we are fully to understand and explain specific human actions, we must
be able to relate those actions to the social narratives or myths of the society to which the actor belongs. It is at least partly through these myths that he makes sense of his world, and thus the meaning of his actions – both to himself and his society – can only be grasped through a knowledge of the structure and meaning of the myth.

(Wright 1977, p. 184)

When viewing the enormously positive reception of *The West Wing* and the emotional identification with the character of President Bartlett, it makes sense to relate the above to this form of politicotainment. Indeed, Crawley (2006, p. 141) suggests that this fictional President conforms to stereotyped conceptions of a President for the show’s US audience, with all his flaws as human being and President: he is intellectual, moral, fatherly and authoritative, and creates a unique meaning system which complies with US traditions and viewers’ expectations. Furthermore, Crawley (2006, p. 129) quotes several instances in the US where this fictional world is held up as an exemplary model to the real world of politics. Even organisations such as the teachers’ union, the National Education Association, or journalists in the *New York Times* and the *Detroit Free Press* refer to Bartlett’s policies as a good model to be followed, or mention characteristics of President Bartlett that the-then presidential candidates Gore and Bush ‘would be wise to copy’. The recontextualisation is also apparent outside of the US: the *Guardian* (5 July 2009), in a long report describing then Conservative leader David Cameron’s ideas about his possible role as Prime Minister, should the Labour Party lose the 2010 general election (as they did in 2010), frequently referred to *The West Wing*. This illustrates how *The West Wing* serves as both global-knowledge brand and context model for the ‘ideal politician’ and ‘politics as usual’ (see also Wodak 2010, p. 56 for an extensive discussion): it is a typical example of presenting specific protagonists (spin-doctors, advisers and strong Presidents) as models for real politicians.

**Vignette 1: *The West Wing*, or, the story of a nurturing patriarch**

The episode (‘Commencement’), which first aired in 2003, takes place on the eve of Bartlett’s daughter Zoey’s commencement. Bartlett, represented as a rather traditional hero, gains authority through wisdom. He is the nurturing parent, overcoming resistance, as in a romantic story (Frye 1957). There is never any doubt who the good guys are, and who is bad and evil. It is certainly the case that Bartlett is not a strict father – yet, he also does not transcend the very form of a traditional hero. Instead, he represents an authoritative voice, but one which is good and wise.

Moreover, as already mentioned, Bartlett depicts the liberal US-American values found in many films (Wodak 2010). The White House and the West Wing are metonyms for the biggest power hubs in US-American politics – this is where the President takes decisions, receives advice, meets staff, welcomes foreign state visits, and negotiates with oppositional politicians and the press. This is where US-American politics is done. The opposition, in this case, the Republican Party, always attempts to oppose and obstruct via their seats in the Senate and Congress; however, due to the two-party system in the US, there are no possibilities (or any tradition) for coalition governments. Thus, the President in the US is not a representative figure (as in some European countries), but effectively the most powerful politician in the US government. In this way, the socio-political and historical contexts in *The West Wing* and *Borgen* are very different – when watching these soaps, the contexts have to be kept in mind in order to understand the subtle underlying intertextual meanings and insinuations as well as presuppositions.
In the following extracts, Bartlett briefs the staff on his past role in a covert killing after five alleged terrorists go missing. Fearing the controversy this may create, press secretary C. J. Cregg is forced to strike a deal with her former boyfriend and influential journalist, Danny, in order to keep the truth buried. Meanwhile, a new Secret Service agent is assigned to protect the graduate Zoey, who wants to spend three months in Paris with her boyfriend after graduation. Bartlett is represented as a shrewd politician, coping with potential terrorists, but also as a concerned father who wants to persuade his daughter to stay in the US. However, Zoey vanishes. Meanwhile, the wife of the President’s personal adviser, Toby, gives birth to twins. Furthermore, throughout the whole episode, we observe the President preparing for commencement and the speech he is due to give there. His – African-American – adviser, Will, helps him prepare the speech at the very last minute. A recurrent theme in *The West Wing*, is that Bartlett excels when giving speeches, even – and sometimes especially – when they are given spontaneously and without notes.

In this scene, Will is instructed to make a start on the speech. Bartlett casually throws out for consideration a number of historical quotes in a gesture that alludes to his broad knowledge. However, Will also reminds the President of his wish to convince Zoey to stay in the US, suggesting that the speech might be counter-productive; while the speech exhorts the nation to embrace change and adventure, Bartlett is concerned to keep his daughter safe at home.

BARTLETT: I’ve been thinking I’d like to talk about creativity. Why don’t you get started on some thoughts and I’ll join you.

WILL: yes sir.


WILL: Well, I think they both work, but since I wouldn’t make any more changes, I’d stay with Gandhi…

BARTLETT: ‘You must be the change’– is that it – ‘You must be the change you wish to see in the world,’ it sounds too much like Eastern philosophy.

WILL: Well, it was bound to, Sir.

BARTLETT: ‘Cause Gandhi lived in India.

WILL: Yeah. Sir, this speech is about creativity and in my judgement it’s a home run. Now what it isn’t is a speech that will convince Zoey not to go to France tomorrow.

BARTLETT: Well let’s write that one.

*And we HEAR the double quintet strike up Pomp and Circumstance.*

Nevertheless, Will observes that as it stands the first draft is a ‘home run’. This sports metaphor (from baseball) serves to create identification with the American audience, as perhaps does the protective urge to keep his daughter at home. The President’s response is short and unequivocal: what is needed is a speech that will keep his daughter safe. When it comes to it, Bartlett’s paternal instincts win out, creating yet a further point of identification for the audience. In this brief interaction, the structure and content of the speech are decided; now it only remains to be written. Although the aide, Will, addresses the President with the deferential epithet ‘Sir’, the interaction nevertheless resembles a brain-storming between peers; hierarchy remains latent, and the President readily accepts advice and criticism.

In this scene, the hero’s exceptional ability is foregrounded. With the casual confidence of a skilful orator, the President has not bothered to write up the whole speech, he merely...
has notes written on napkins stuffed in his pockets. Unfortunately, by putting on his university gown, he cannot retrieve the notes, and thus, he suddenly discovers when desperately searching for – and not finding – his notes that he will have to speak without consulting them.

AIDE: Mr. President?

**BARTLETT** understands it’s time. He zips up his gown, which includes the requisite chevrons for his degrees, honours and disciplines and two cowls. The uniform of academic knighthood.

CHANCELLOR: Are you ready, Mr. President?

BARTLETT: Yeah. Thanks, Will, for the help.

WILL: (smiles) Use the Eudora Welty, it’s better.

BARTLETT: Thank you.

And **BARTLETT and the CHANCELLOR**, also impressively decked out in academic badges, lead the procession of FACULTY in their gowns and as they come out, the SPECTATORS all stand and APPLAUD.

CHANCELLOR: Are you not using the Tele Prompter.

BARTLETT: Yeah, no, I’ve got it down here folder…and on some napkins in pockets.

In this my

CHANCELLOR: Are you gonna be all right with that?

BARTLETT: Oh yeah, I’ll be fine, you know unless something comes up.

CHANCELLOR: like what?

BARTLETT: Well for instance I just realized I don’t have access to my pockets anymore, but you know, what are you gonna do?!

The rhetorical question at the end of this brief sequence manifests both the President’s witty self-irony (at not being able to find his notes; a safe and humorous moment of human frailty) and his jovial self-assurance that he will just have to manage without his notes, which – as we are meant to infer – will not cause any problems for him. Our hero’s exceptional ability is further underlined in the preceding sequence, where the university chancellor is surprised that the President will not make use of the teleprompter. Earlier in the scene, we again see the human, approachable side of our hero as he takes time to thank his aide, Will, who in turn throws out a last-minute word of advice about which quote to use.

These two sequences illustrate several important characteristics of the President: he has a sense of humour, accepts advice and criticism, and is knowledgeable (even about Eastern philosophy). He also proposes the rather abstract notion of ‘creativity’ as the general topic for his speech, further adding to this portrayal of a liberal-minded and intellectual hero. He interacts quite informally with his aides and team, is spontaneous and flexible, capable of accommodating new situations quickly, and subtly strategic (he would like to convince his daughter to stay at home, so crafts a speech specifically tailored so as to persuade his daughter). As we have seen, he is also self-confident (he knows that he can manage without notes). Indeed, one might speculate whether this performance (speaking without notes) was staged so that he would have the opportunity to display his oratory prowess. Thus, in sum this hero-type can be described as a nurturing patriarch, an essentially good and wise man who takes equal care of both the nation as well as his family. It is, however, also a subject-type that comes close to a traditional, romantic hero who, in our case due to expertise and knowledge instead of his sword, is poised to steer his people through difficult periods and overcome such obstacles. As such, this patriarch invites unproblematic identification by the audience.
Through this scene, and of course many more throughout this episode, a wise, amiable and paternal hero is constructed who will ultimately protect his daughter and save the country from terrorists. This basic plot structure is repeated in other episodes, suggesting that *The West Wing* genre resembles traditional (that is, simple) plots where heroes save the country from dangerous villains and win in the end. This also means, however, that the series implicitly constructs politics as a series of stories where the good and the bad are easily distinguished and the wise President will finally make the right decisions.

*Borgen* however, as will become apparent below, differs in some relevant aspects; featuring a less generic plot and offering a less melodramatic separation into good and bad.

### Vignette 2: *Borgen*, or, the story of a nurturing multitasker

At the centre of the (so-far) final season, season 3, we encounter two women; first, Nyborg who has returned to politics after her meteoric rise to Prime Minister in season 1 was followed by her exit in order to care for her children in season 2, and, second, Katrine Fønsmark, her spin-doctor. Both are single mothers, but, as middle-upper class, highly educated women, they remain distant from the reality that most single mothers in low-paid, insecure jobs experience. Nevertheless, this context alone provides a different background for the fictionalisation of politics than the stories of male heroes analysed above. Of course, President Bartlett cares for his daughter and mobilises the FBI and the army whenever she is in danger; however, he has a dedicated wife who is in charge of the everyday life routines of the family. The US-American family is characterised by traditional gender roles and does not require the President to deal with the dilemmas faced by single parents.

These differences are embedded in a much wider set of diverging structures: it is certainly no coincidence that it is a Scandinavian political soap that has put a female Prime Minister centre-stage. The political system in which Nyborg operates is also evidently different from that of the US, given that the former is a multi-party system, a factor that contributes much to the drama. However, similar to *The West Wing*, the political scene is closely mapped onto real-world conflicts and dynamics. While *The West Wing* alludes extensively to the conflict between Democrats and Republicans, the difference between former President Clinton and the-then President Bush, those familiar with Danish politics will easily recognise how closely the parties – and in many cases, characters – in *Borgen* map onto the country’s political landscape.

In order to elaborate on the difference between the two series, let us consider episode 9 of the third season of *Borgen*. The election campaign is in full swing and Nyborg’s party, the New Democrats, have become established and stable; the party looks forward to winning four to six mandates. This would be a success for a new party, but it would not be enough to influence politics and would thus only be another small party in opposition. This is largely due to the fact that one member of the party’s inner circle, Nete Buch, had forwarded strategic information to their main rivals, the also centrist Moderates under Jacob Kruse. The latter were thus able to appropriate proposal after proposal by the New Democrats (greenwashing their programme, taking a harder stance against the anti-immigrant Freedom Party, etc.) and have thereby squeezed the political space.

In this situation, Brigitte decides to take a risk by attacking the Moderates, unmasking their hypocrisy and positioning the New Democrats as the true ‘party of the centre’. At a public debate with Kruse, she attacks their policies, literally tearing apart their programme. In consequence, the Moderates start a campaign against her, by attacking her personality (ad
hominem), to which Brigitte reacts by stating concisely that ‘We’ll stick to politics. Let Kruse wear himself out with personal attacks’. However, Fønsmark, her spin-doctor, is sceptical, a stance which is fuelled by Kasper Juul, the former spin-doctor of Nyborg, and father of Fønsmark’s son, who offers Fønsmark proof of what would be a major scandal: the young and married Kruse had caused a car accident under the influence of alcohol (with a mistress at his side). Being aware of the contemporary media logic, Fønsmark is convinced that the story needs to be published:

FØNSMARK: It’s a good one.
JUUL: Amazing.

While showing her close up and absolutely delighted for several seconds, Fønsmark then turns her head in anticipation of Nyborg’s stance, saying ‘[i]t’s not our kind of thing’. Juul, in turn, acts as a manipulator, suggesting to practice the dark arts of leaking materials to the public while protecting his boss from any accusation of involvement. In fact, we see Fønsmark calling a newspaper but, ultimately, hanging up and trying to convince Nyborg to receive authorisation for using the material without discrediting her; something the latter, however, rejects on moral grounds. As Kruse’s attacks increase, her colleagues expect Nyborg to react, but she sticks to her commitment not to attack her opponent personally. Instead, she commissions a serious calculation of the credibility of the Moderates’ economic policy (making the viewer wonder whether or not Nyborg actually understands the public which – as is presupposed as common knowledge – is receptive to scandals).

One day later, we see Fønsmark in her messy flat, searching for her son’s shoe, bumping her head and taking a phone call (she is late). As Juul arrives to look after their son, Gustav, he tells her that he had seen Kruse with two journalists responsible for the witch hunt and is surprised that the New Democrats have not followed his advice to publish the aforementioned materials.

The situation changes in the evening of the very same day (two days before the election) when a tabloid journalist harasses Laura, Nyborg’s daughter. When informed about this event, Nyborg (who is meeting her mentor Bent Sejrø, as well as Katrine Fønsmark) loses control – the safety of her children is an absolute priority.

NYBORG: They have to leave my children alone.
SEJRØ: You know how it is.
NYBORG: They can call me a hypocrite. But they have to lay off my children. It is definitely Kruse’s doing. [2] Run it.

Bent is surprised as he has not heard of this opportunity but protests:

SEJRØ: Birgitte, don’t do it.
NYBORG (walking up and down like a tiger in a cage): He’s gone too far.
SEJRØ: It’s not politically relevant.
NYBORG: He went for my children.

While viewers might sympathise with this account of political life, as it triggers identification with Brigitte and a mother’s reaction, and also reminds them of their own emotions, it is important to note the presence of Bent Sejrø, who clearly tells the audience (and Nyborg) what the ‘right’ thing to do would be. Indeed, Borgen does not seem to justify Nyborg’s
response, not even at this point – given that she calls her partner later in the night, telling him, ‘I am afraid, I have gone over to the dark side’.

When she goes through the newspapers the next morning, but cannot find the story, she calls Fønsmark. The latter confesses to not submitting the information and is prepared to get fired. However, Nyborg says that ‘It was a bit… hasty of me. I’m grateful you didn’t’. Ultimately, this tactic proves to be successful as, in the final debate, Nyborg takes Kruse by surprise with her detailed economic critique of the Moderates’ programme and thereby, ultimately, secures her triumph in the election in a rational and unemotional way.

When comparing this episode to The West Wing’s values and gist, what does the audience learn from this vignette? When approaching this question, we suggest the tag of nurturing multitasker for Nyborg: she is undoubtedly ‘nurturing’ and ‘good’, thus inviting identification. However, she is also troubling and troubled, never simply represented as a stereotypical female politician, thus as ‘tough, cold, and ambitious’ or ‘motherly, emotional, and caring’, but rather as a politician who learns and then knows how to play the game. At the same time, there are clear limits: she is not prepared to play dirty and, when she finally does, it is presented as a failure. Indeed, she ultimately regrets her decision and, luckily, it was not implemented anyway. However, while this episode seems to offer a happy ending, the latter is only enabled by a friend, Katrine, while Nyborg acknowledges her wrong decision and judgement.

This plot – a good person fails but, together with the support of her loyal team, ultimately succeeds in doing the ‘right thing’ – is not an isolated incident. After all, in another major storyline in season 3, when Nyborg is diagnosed with breast cancer, she tries to fight the illness on her own. After a series of private and professional setbacks, she realizes her ‘weakness’, tells her children and colleagues about her illness, and succeeds in overcoming the cancer. Thus, she is also more than a stereotypical patriarch, not simply standing above things and managing everything with ease. Rather, she is constantly multitasking, trying to cope with many challenges. Bondebjerg (2015, p. 7) offers a convincing model by proposing four ‘spaces’ that Nyborg has to confront daily: political, media, private and social – something that ‘realistically’ must result in unsatisfactory outcomes: multitasking tends to cause failure and, consequently, leads to a rather fragmented hero-type who, while still inviting identification by the audience, nevertheless does so in a less affirmative, more complex way.

Conclusion

Throughout The West Wing, heroes are, even in situations related to private and intimate issues, constructed as (charismatic) authorities and assigned mythical qualities (such as being able to solve the ‘big problems of the world’). The complexity of politics in a global world is thus simplified; complex, multi-dimensional processes across space and time, and a diversity of social fields are reduced to telegenic personalities, distinct events and simple solutions. The above-mentioned reactions of the audience and press demonstrate that such representations produce and reproduce stereotyped expectations towards, and beliefs about, politics, exploiting cognitive and emotional schemata or shared ‘mental models’ of the behaviour and life of politicians, which in fact do not relate to the complex reality in political institutions. In effect, such stories construct a banal and romanticised version of politics that often bears very little resemblance to the real world. Nevertheless, part of the appeal of these programmes is that they appear to offer viewers a ‘behind the scenes’ look at a familiar yet inaccessible social practice. For this reason, they need to offer a recognisable representation of that practice.
Borgen is not fundamentally different in this respect; however, it asks the audience to identify with a ‘modern family’: first, a career woman who is accused of neglecting her husband and her children, and then learns to set her priorities in a different way. Second, a female politician who learns ‘doing politics’ the hard way, becomes successful and manages the daily negotiations and setbacks, the strategies and tactics (realpolitik) very well. And third, learning to cope with challenges in her private and public life in independent ways, taking decisions for which she is responsible without relying too much on her advisers.

In both, and also in other similar programmes, politics becomes manageable in space and time, divisible into temporal sequences and units. Politics is thus packaged and glamorised through plot devices and dramatic tropes, taking place amid anxiety, panic, danger, imminent disaster, intrigue, illness, comic moments, love affairs, and so on. Problems are solved and each story given a moral. The hero lastly wins and ‘good’ values triumph. In contrast, empirical research on the everyday life of real politicians illustrates (Wodak 2011) that their life is far from neatly packaged into stories, isolated problems and straightforward plots. Rather, it is a hectic life, filled with a variety of activities ranging from repetitive routines to complex decision-making and the management of urgent affairs. Themes, agendas and topics merge into one another; there seems to be no explicit temporal order as to when and how agendas are finalised and implemented; and many different agendas are pursued at the same time. Disturbances can always – and unpredictably – occur.

The fictionalisation of politics (and the politicisation of fiction), therefore, has several consequences: creating a world that is still manageable through the traditional routines of politics; through diplomacy, press conferences, speeches and negotiations. This is a world where ‘good’ values prevail – (where what is ‘good’ is defined by the series, the presupposed morals, and represented by the fictional characters). This world also, potentially, ‘educates’ by exploiting the passivising medium of televised politicotainment to socialise the audience into the ‘good values’ it constructs and, perhaps, to stimulate greater interest in politics in an increasingly apathetic electorate.

As the preceding analyses demonstrate, The West Wing creates a myth about the activities and characters of US politics, in contrast to the existing experiences of incomprehensibility that draw on particular schemata with a long tradition in the US, in the genre of Western (cowboy) films. Moreover, The West Wing has to be interpreted against the background of enormous dislike and critique of the Bush government after 9/11 and nostalgia – wishing back a liberal Clinton-like President. In contrast, Borgen depicts the trajectory of an ambitious and successful woman, struggling with multiple challenges in her family and working lives. Both TV soaps offer a range of options for identification. As The West Wing and Borgen are also translated and aired worldwide, the various storylines are recontextualised in other countries and cultures. They carry implications for audience beliefs about, and engagement with, the real world of politics. Given the manifest popularity of these programmes, we hope that critical reflection on the impact of the fictionalisation of politics will inform future research.

Notes
1 www.imdb.com/title/tt1526318/reviews
2 www.npr.org/2014/02/04/271525839/borgen-is-denmarks-west-wing-but-even-better
3 This is, by the way, also true for the everyday life of politicians in huge organisations such as the European Parliament. In the first author’s own observations, briefing and updating of politicians by their advisors takes place in the long corridors, running from one meeting to the next (Wodak 2011).
Propp extended the Russian Formalist approach to the study of narrative structure. In the Formalist approach, sentence structures were broken down into analysable elements termed morphemes. Drawing on this approach, Propp devised an analogous method for analysing Russian folktales, identifying 31 generic functions performed by archetypal characters (hero, villain, victim, and so forth – see Propp 1968, pp. 25–65 and 84–86).

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