Since its release in 1997, *Wag the Dog* has made US$43,061,945, been shown in 1,752 theatres worldwide and is one of the highest grossing political satires since 1979.\(^1\) Described in its promotional posters as “a comedy about truth, justice and other special effects,”\(^2\) it chronicles the attempts of political spin-doctor Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) and film producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) as they try to create a fake war against Albania out of images and video clips in an effort as to distract the American public from a sex scandal plaguing the president who is running for re-election with only two weeks to go. Weeks after the movie’s release, news of President Clinton’s sexual misconduct broke and the film was marketed by drawing parallels with the scandal.\(^3\) The title’s phrase has entered journalistic vernacular, and taking on a pejorative tone, often used to describe situations in which a government is perceived as trying to distract or deceive its people.\(^4\)

In this essay, I argue for the importance of political satire in visual culture as it allows the airing of views that might run contrary to popular opinion. Moreover, an appreciation of satire (in any form) can help cultivate ways of thinking that increase one’s propensity to intuitively identify contradiction, connection and construction in

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political discourse. This is because the very methods through which satire functions, namely: irony, parody, paradox, juxtaposition, allusion and self-reflexivity, serve to highlight hypocrisy, illusion and incongruence in the portrayal of politics by political actors and the media. However, this awareness can be a double-edged sword. While it makes the public shrewder when it comes to participating in and understanding politics, it can also create a cynicism and overly distrustful attitude that is counterproductive to a true understanding of politics and political situations.\(^5\) This paradox is examined in the film *Wag the Dog* through a discussion of the ways in which it achieves satire, how successful it is in that endeavour and the impact it had on the political situation in America when it was released.

The message the film attempts to bring across is, in director Barry Levinson’s own words, that politicians can now “use and manipulate and abuse the media for short periods of time” in order to “twist and re-shape and basically blur the areas [between truth and reality]”.\(^6\) This is a rather strong message that I feel would not have been as easily accepted if not for the use of satire in the film. As Karnick and Jenkins write, “we experience comedy as an exhilarating release from social control.”\(^7\) However, they qualify this with Douglas’s view that “jokes can allow a public airing of transgressive views only … [when] they can no longer be taken seriously, and only where these alternatives are already gaining some modicum of social acceptance”.\(^8\) Thus, due to the paradox of comedy where the message is always, intentionally or unintentionally, undermined by its very nature, it is not my argument that this film in particular taught audiences to see things differently. Instead, I argue that the whole

\(^8\) ibid (emphasis added)
concept of political satire serves to encourage ways of thinking that lead to the identification and rejection of deceptive strategies used by the government and media in political discourse. I will simply be using this film to examine this phenomenon.

Firstly, irony and paradox are used to large extent to achieve comedy. The title makes use of irony on a semantic level, where the “tail,” which should be under the command of the dog, is in fact paradoxically controlling it. Instead of the government serving the will of the people, the government is directing that will where it pleases. Ironic antiphrasis is also seen in Motss’s inquiry if Brean wants him to “produce [his] war” when Brean first approaches him with the proposal. Here, “produce” can refer to both the fabrication of the war and the logistics involved in its creation, highlighting the absurdity of the entire enterprise. The ability of the audience to realise the significance and humour in such a statement testifies to their ability to realise that words themselves are polyvalent, and subsequently that there are ways in which we are steered toward a particular definition of these words. For example, when Bush says, “when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace,” or declares a “war on terror,” he is really setting out a very narrow way of understanding the terms “war”, “peace” and “terror”. Once one is able to understand that words mean more than what they overtly appear to signify, one is able to question and negotiate meaning instead of merely accepting it.

Parody is also used to satirise the stereotypes of The Hollywood Producer, The Washington Spin-Doctor and The President. The character of Stanley Motss is

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9 Clip 1 of Appendix 2 (CD)
10 Clip 2 of Appendix 2 (CD)
believed to be a parody of Robert Evans,\textsuperscript{12} mocking the superficial, egotistical producer who constantly whines about not getting enough credit. The character of Conrad Brean can be seen as a combination of George Stephanopoulos and James Carville as they were portrayed in \textit{The War Room} and Dick Morris, Clinton’s own spin-doctor.\textsuperscript{13} He embodies the shady, manipulative and deceptive puppet-master, pulling the strings behind the scene. This is made more apparent in the portrayal of the President as ineffectual, morally suspect and easily swayed. The one moment where he expresses discomfort with the ploy, refusing to read the speech about the fictional war hero is deflated when it is revealed that this is due to his view of the speech as too “corny”.\textsuperscript{14}

The crux film’s satire lies in the interaction and cooperation of these three characters, the juxtapositions of their characters showing the parallels between Hollywood and Washington. Either Motts or Brean could easily be the President.\textsuperscript{15} After all, Motts is smarter, better connected, more charismatic and more attuned to the vox populi than the president while Brean is seen as the one who really holds the keys to power. The parallel drawn between the world of movies and politics brings across the point that what it all boils down to is the creation of an image, a product that is sold to the people for consumption. Being able to identify the connections between what Maureen Dowd calls the “twin towers of illusion”\textsuperscript{16} allows one to see the connections between seemingly unrelated spheres and, by extension, seemingly unrelated people or events. As has been suggested in countless other political satires, there is a lot more

\textsuperscript{14} Clip 3 of Appendix 2 (CD)
\textsuperscript{15} Clip 4 of Appendix 2 (CD)
to the story than we are aware of but we must be willing to look beneath the surface in order to see the hypocrisy that exists.

Yet, the film seems to differ in its treatment of Hollywood and Washington. The self-reflexive scenes involving the brainstorming sessions that Motss has with his production team parody the marketing, music and costume departments of Hollywood. However, here the parody seems more ambivalent and good-natured as the scenes mock as well as valourise the stereotypes of the fast-talking and self-involved eccentric artist. While portraying them as superficial and solipsistic, the scenes also paint them as creative, talented and dedicated. The scenes display the amount of thought and precision that goes into the creation of media, the insistence of “hunter green” as opposed to “kelly green”, “a small calico kitten” as opposed to a “white kitten”, and the off-handed remark that a “hand held camera” will make it look like “you know, news footage”. In contrast to the portrayal of Brean and his operatives, their goal no longer seems disturbing and audacious. Rather, the scenes seem to be inviting the audience to be part of the process instead of judging their motivations.

In fact, in the audience’s imagination, these scenes would be similar to the brainstorming sessions that took place prior to the creation of *Wag the Dog* itself. To be able to see this as a parody requires of the audience a sense of what goes into making a film. They have to understand that this very movie has been constructed in the same way the characters on the screen are creating the news footage. It is only then that they comprehend the parody and are amused by the comic twists added to the imitation of real life on screen. Once this is understood, there is a realisation that

17 Clip 5 of Appendix 2 (CD)
the movie is itself a construct, documenting the construction of yet another media construct. The viewer is then able to put in perspective all other media that he or she consumes. When it comes to political discourse, this intuitive skill is extremely important in the recognition of false or embellished information. By understanding the self-reflexive nature of these scenes, the audience is able to deconstruct other forms of media and see them as separate from reality, operating under the knowledge that every image can be doctored. They are also able to identify the importance that Hollywood places on marketing and commercial success, making them more aware of economic intentions that might underlie every piece of media they encounter.

Yet, this very parody of Hollywood works against the film in its attempt to achieve the level of satire as defined by Linda Hutcheon, where there is “a negative evaluation and a corrective intent.” Given that no solution is given at the end of the film, and that the President manages to get away with the fraud, there seems to be the suggestion the public is doomed to live in this state of deception forever. There is no suggested course of action or the elevation of human agency. For instance, when a member of the communications staff mentions "the thing with the yellow ribbons," and Ames begins to call it "a naturally occurring…" Brean gazes at her pityingly before she can even say "phenomenon." The foregone conclusion that everything is illusion does not, nor does it intend to, spur the audience on to action. Moreover, the audience themselves is not made to identify with the public in the film. They are not made part of the target; they are instead made to feel superior to the public in the film, as they have been made privy to the goings-on behind the scenes. The audience is treated as confidant, brought behind the scenes to witness the idea from initial

19 This is a reference to how Americans began tying yellow ribbons around trees in their neighbourhoods signifying their support for American troops during the Gulf War. It popularised the Americans but was seen as a somewhat politicised trend.
20 Clip 6 of Appendix 2 (CD)
inspiration to final fruition. They seem to be absolved of responsibility while the 
media and those with political power are the real targets of satire.

Meanwhile, the media is painted as irresponsible, easily duped and stupidly repeating 
sound bites. No one makes even a simple phone call to Albania to confirm the 
existence of a war, or questions the source of a tape of an Albanian refugee, shot by 
Motss, that is played all over the news. The audience is given the media as a 
capegoat, allowed to blame them, while they themselves remain innocent secondary 
victims of the lies. In the same way, Hollywood is not implicated in the dishonesty 
either. Motss is seen as open and likeable, enjoying his craft while Brean is the one 
who really holds the strings and is ruthless in his guarding of secrecy and 
maintenance of the status quo. The film, in what appears to be an act of self-defense, 
does not target the Hollywood system and its ability to construct reality but instead 
seems to have more to say about the political powers that are making use of this 
power.

This selective casting of blame, endemic to most modern political satire in American 
media, results in an overly cynical view of politics. The movie thus not only raises 
questions about the administration’s manipulation of the media, but also the media’s 
construction of politics as show business. The satire of the film works precisely 
because of the stereotypes it is parodying, serving to reinforce them and build up 
images of politicians and the those in the media industry that are difficult to shake. I 
believe part of the reason the film was so well received was that people were so used 
to the idea of politicians as manipulative and deceptive that they were quick to accept

21 Clip 7 of Appendix 2 (CD)
the premise of the movie and have a laugh at its expense. The novel that the film is based on, *American Hero* by Larry Beinhart, is specifically about George H.W. Bush and how he had instigated the Gulf War of 1991 as a media event to secure his re-election. However, it has come to be seen as an analogy for many more events.

In the US, the coincidence of its release with the Clinton scandal and US military action against Iraq and the Sudan resulted in the premise of the movie being used to explain Clinton’s national security decisions. It was argued by many in the mass media that he was trying to distract the public from domestic problems by focusing on what was seen as unnecessary military action abroad. This trend has continued up to today, with the tactic of ‘wagging the dog’ being used to describe Bush’s actions in Iraq and Obama’s reactions to problems such as the global economic crisis.

Outside of the US, the Iraqi and Yugoslav governments used it to protest against US military action against them. During the NATO campaign against Yugoslavia in defense of the Albanian population of Kosovo, the *New York Times* reported that one Yugoslav official claimed that the Kosovo refugees were “actors … getting paid $5.50 a day by NATO.”

It was not just the way in which the themes of the films were picked up by the media that resulted in this distrust of government. The proliferation of images and slogans emphasising deception and foul play on the part of those in power through the marketing of the movie also played a part. The promotional posters for the movie, 23

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interviews done by its stars and critical acclaim that the film won all added to the validity and reach of its arguments. This is not limited merely to this movie but to many popular satires such as Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004). Even if people do not see the film, the mere presence of a poster with a slogan such as “Controversy … What Controversy”²⁸ add to the proliferation of images and media that repeatedly tell the public to be wary of government. Albert Brooks saw the power in this and in fact insisted that his satire of American perceptions of Islam, Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World (2006),²⁹ retain its title despite objections from the studios. To him, it was important that people see the words ‘comedy’ and ‘Muslim’ together, even if they do not see the movie.³⁰

Thus, Wag the Dog, as a representation of modern political satire in film, shows the lessons that satire can teach as well as the downfalls that its proliferation can cause. While it does give audiences skills which enable them to more critically assess how politics is represented in the media, it might also cause them to have unwarranted disdain or distrust for both government and the media. As an ever-present part of politics and visual culture, it plays a crucial role in exposing contradiction and incongruence yet can undermine itself when viewers become indiscriminately critical of or distanced from political culture.

²⁸ Image 3 in Appendix 1
²⁹ Image 4 in Appendix 1
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Newspaper Articles


Videos