Working with a movie: *Wag the Dog*

**Approach**

The object of the following work is to set this movie in the context of American politics and American history and to examine it as a satirical piece of cinema. The movie is concerned with the federal level of government in the USA. Specifically, it deals with the relationship between the Presidency, the media and the public in the country at large. The work below will focus on these relationships, both in the movie and in reality.

**Introduction**

The movie *Wag the Dog* is from 1997 and is 1 hour 37 minutes long. The title of the movie comes from an old saying in America;

*Why does a dog wag its tail?*

*Because the dog is smarter than the tail.*

*If the tail were smarter, it would wag the dog.*

The title sets the satirical tone of the movie, which is a black comedy about how public opinion can be manipulated through the media. It is full of irony and sarcasm.

Set in Washington, it tells the story of a President who is caught having sexual relations with a “Fire Fly Girl” (the equivalent of a Girl Scout) in the White House two weeks before the presidential election. A media expert, Conrad Brean, is called in to fix the problem. To draw public attention away from the scandal and create support for the President, Brean decides to create a “fake” war with Albania. He brings in a famous Hollywood producer, Stanly Motss, to create this illusion. The movie follows the process by which this is done, with suitable complications. The effort turns out to be successful, but the participants must never tell what has happened ...
Cast:

- **Dustin Hoffman**  Stanley Motss
- **Robert De Niro**  Conrad Brean
- **Anne Heche**  Winifred Ames
- **Willie Nelson**  Johnny Dean
- **Kirsten Dunst**  Tracy Lime
- **William H. Macy**  CIA Agent Charles Young
- **Woody Harrelson**  Sgt. William "the Old Shoe" Schumann
- **Michael Belson**  The President

Getting Started

The movie deals with political life in Washington. What do you associate with the following terms and phrases? If necessary, you can find information about them on the internet.

- press conference
- breaking news
- Senators
- graft
- spin doctor
- show business
- need to know
- slogans
- lobbyists
- media hype
- Congressmen
- interest groups
- CIA
- cover up

Watch the movie

There will be questions about content and language afterwards.
Discussion

1. Why is this movie called *Wag the Dog*? What is the “dog” and what is the “tail”?

2. Satire is intended to make fun of institutions, ideas and persons in order to criticize them. How would you sum up the critique of the role of media in American politics given in this movie?

3. To achieve its effects, satire tends to exaggerate the qualities it wishes to make fun of. What kind of exaggerations do you find in this movie? Did you find them amusing?

4. Do you think there is an element of truth in the portrayal of the mass media and spin doctors given in this movie?

5. There has been a debate about whether to let political parties have commercials in Norwegian radio and TV during elections. Do you think this should be permitted?

Understanding dialogue

Make groups of four:

The following are quotes from the movie. Place them in their correct context; i.e. explain when in the movie they occur and what they refer to. Can you explain why they are satirical?

1. 
   **Conrad Brean:** We’re not gonna have a war, we’re gonna have the appearance of a war.

2. 
   **Conrad Brean:** What’s the thing people remember about the Gulf War? A bomb falling down a chimney. Let me tell you something: I was in the building where we filmed that with a 10-inch model made out of Legos.
   **Stanley Motss:** Is that true?
   **Conrad Brean:** Who the hell’s to say?

3. 
   **Winifred Ames:** Why Albania?
   **Conrad Brean:** Why not?
   **Winifred Ames:** What have they done to us?
   **Conrad Brean:** What have they done FOR us? What do you know about them?
   **Winifred Ames:** Nothing.
   **Conrad Brean:** See? They keep to themselves. Shifty. Untrustable.
4.
Stanley Motss: I'm in show business, why come to me?
Conrad Brean: War is show business, that's why we're here.

5.
Conrad Brean: And it's most certainly NOT about the B-3 bomber.
John Levy: There is no B-3 bomber.
Conrad Brean: I just said that! There is no B-3 bomber. I don't know how these rumors get started!

6.
Conrad Brean: What did television ever do to you?
Winifred Ames: It destroyed the electoral process!

7.
Stanley Motss: The President will be a hero. He brought peace.
Conrad Brean: But there was never a war.
Stanley Motss: All the greater accomplishment.

8.
Conrad Brean: Stanley, don’t do this. You’re playing with your life here.
Stanley Motss: Fuck my life! I want the credit.

Language
Match up the following expressions taken from the movie with their correct meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I didn’t step up, you’re nowhere</td>
<td>to finish something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The success … is based on the spin given these events</td>
<td>a difficult situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try a 10AM pitch meeting …</td>
<td>too emotional or sentimental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He’s alive! Strike that.</td>
<td>remove that / that’s wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can I do to top this?</td>
<td>how a story is manipulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s close out the thing in style</td>
<td>cheap to do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He says it's corny.

You think you’re in a tight spot now?

Do you want to fill me in on that?

Then you get the ... merchandising tie-in

Albanian terrorists have a staging area ...

What’s this? Head shots.

That’s terrific, because it’s cost effective.

The President wonders about an Albanian backlash.

He didn’t sell the line.

Face the music, whatever it might be.

Roust them out of bed!

If it gets out, you leaked it.

to give information about something
to do better than
to accept the consequences of actions taken
to wake someone suddenly with loud noises
to take on responsibility for something
a strong reaction against something
photos of persons’ faces
to secretly give information to the media
meeting to sell a movie idea
connection to sales of other related products
to convince the listeners

### Historical context

Work in groups of four on one of the following tasks:

1. This movie came out shortly before a scandal broke in Washington involving President Bill Clinton and a young woman named Monica Lewinsky. Comparisons were made between the two. Find out what happened in the Lewinsky scandal and compare it with the events in the movie. Do you find similarities?
   
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewinsky_scandal
   http://www.philippoppen.com/wagthedog.html

2. Some have made comparisons between *Wag the Dog* and the actions of President George W. Bush during his administration. Take a look at the following websites and see if you can find any reasons for such a comparison.

   http://www.zcommunications.org/wag-the-dog-by-michael-t-k Clare
   http://www.mail-archive.com/pen-l@galaxy.csuchico.edu/msg71582.html
   http://www.atim es.com/atimes/Middle_East/GK17Ak05.html
Review vocabulary

One special genre of writing is the review of movies, books, music, etc. In either praising or panning a work of art, the critic will use descriptive language with modifiers and evaluative words and active verbs. In the two extracts from reviews below, some of the words have been removed. Choose the right word from the list that will complete the reviews.

List of words:
buoyed; lacks; on-target; matches; eclipsing; thought-provoking; innovative; zeal; hilarious; delightful; sure

Review by James Berardinelli

Hollywood and Presidential politics – perfect together. Anyone who doubts this simple maxim will face a challenge to their opinion when they see WAG THE DOG, the ___________ new satire from director Barry Levinson. For, although this film is one of the funniest comedies of the year, it also carries a serious, ___________ message about the relationship between politics and mass-market entertainment. This is one of Levinson's best films, and the screenplay, co-penned by noted writer David Mamet (along with Hilary Henkin), is brilliantly__________________.

Levinson directs WAG THE DOG with a _______________ hand. The director has a spotty resume – he has been responsible for winners like TIN MEN and RAIN MAN (also with Hoffman) and losers like TOYS. This time around, he's in complete control of the material. Meanwhile, Mamet has honed his pen to its sharpest to systematically slice apart targets ranging from television news reporting methods to the political process. While doing so, he has come up with some _____________ interpretations of various recent historical events. For example, who recalls how soon after the Beirut disaster the United States "invaded" Grenada?

The actors all play their roles with_____________. De Niro, getting a chance to play a character who's not a gangster or a heavy, is___________, and it's easy to believe that Conrad is the best in the business. If I needed a spin doctor, he'd be first on my list. Hoffman ______________ him scene for scene as the sleazy-but-ambitious producer. The actor almost never turns in a bad performance, but this is his best in several years, ______________ what he did in Mamet's AMERICAN BUFFALO.

Review by Bob McCabe
Written in part by David Mamet, *Wag the Dog* is a lovely idea, with credibility ________by its incredible timeliness. But, content with its initial premise, the movie ________the necessary bite to develop the satire further, to the point where it's difficult to spot whether Washington or Hollywood is the target.

**Writing exercise**

An English-language students’ magazine has a special column entitled *Critics’ Corner* where readers are asked to review the weekend’s movies on TV. *Wag the Dog* is going to be on Channel 4 this weekend. Write your review of the movie.
Key: Language

If I didn’t step up, you’re nowhere
The success...is based on the spin given these events
Try a 10AM pitch meeting ...
He’s alive! Strike that.
What can I do to top this?
Let’s close out the thing in style
He says it’s corny.
You think you’re in a tight spot now?
Do you want to fill me in on that?
Then you get the...merchandising tie-in
Albanian terrorists have a staging area...
What’s this? Head shots.
That’s terrific, because it’s cost effective.
The President wonders about an Albanian backlash.
He didn’t sell the line.
Face the music, whatever it might be.
Roust them out of bed!
If it gets out, you leaked it.

to take on responsibility for something
how a story is manipulated
meeting to sell a movie idea
remove that/that’s wrong
to do better than
to finish something
too emotional or sentimental
a difficult situation
give information about something
connection to sales of other related products
a place where operations are organized
photos of persons’ faces
cheap to do
a strong reaction against something
convince the listeners
accept the consequences of actions taken
wake someone suddenly with loud noises
secretly give information to the media

Key: Review vocabulary

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[...]

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recent historical events. For example, who recalls how soon after the Beirut disaster the United States "invaded" Grenada?

The actors all play their roles with zeal. De Niro, getting a chance to essay a character who’s not a gangster or a heavy, is delightful, and it’s easy to believe that Conrad is the best in the business. If I needed a spin doctor, he’d be first on my list. Hoffman matches him scene for scene as the sleazy-but-ambitious producer. The actor almost never turns in a bad performance, but this is his best in several years, eclipsing what he did in Mamet’s AMERICAN BUFFALO. Anne Heche, who has been in the news for her personal life, is capable as the proverbial dumb blond. Woody Harrelson is wonderfully thick doing his best Billy Bob Thornton impression. Cameos include Kirsten Dunst as an actress hired to play an Albanian refugee, William H. Macy as CIA agent Young, and Craig T. Nelson as Senator John Neal, the President’s challenger. It is also worth noting that Levinson got around the tricky task of casting the President by never showing his face. This is entirely appropriate, since everything we learn about the man is a shadowy, insubstantial fabrication.

To avoid making WAG THE DOG sound too much like an intellectual challenge, let me make this clarification: the movie is intelligent, but it’s also a lot of fun. This is the kind of film that you can laugh and think your way through. I look forward to seeing WAG THE DOG another time, and I think I’ll enjoy it as much, if not more. No matter what your political persuasion is, or how cynically you regard the goings-on in Washington, you will be entertained. Let’s just hope WAG THE DOG isn’t too close to the mark in its depiction of specific events.

[http://www.imdb.com/reviews/98/9853.html]

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[http://vutosiva.t35.com/download-Wag-the-Dog.html]