



Winning the War against Truth

Scandal, Spin and Stockholm Syndrome in *Wag the Dog*

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Set in the US in the late 1990s, *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997) chronicles the behind-the-scenes machinations of a political public relations expert – otherwise known as a spin doctor – hired to aid the re-election campaign of an incumbent President of the United States in the midst of accusations of sexual misconduct with an under-age girl in the Oval Office.

The film was released during Bill Clinton's presidency, only months before he was accused of lying over his sexual misconduct with White House intern Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office. Critics and audiences were stunned by the film's uncanny timeliness, as well as by President Clinton's authorisation of bombings in Sudan and Afghanistan on the very day Lewinsky testified before the grand jury investigating the scandal. To many, *Wag the Dog* seemed to foreshadow the whole sordid event and remains to this day a fascinating, if fantastical,

portrayal of the way in which public relations experts at the highest levels work.

Thinking through what *Wag the Dog* has to say, and how it says it, is a worthwhile undertaking, and I will analyse the film by focusing on the parallels between two sets of conflicting perspectives that are at once explored in and created by the film. The first perspective is that of the people of the US and their attitude towards the fictional President, who has been accused of sexual misconduct two weeks before an election. The second is that of the audience of the film and their view of spin doctor Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro), who is brought in by the President to manage the unfolding scandal. My argument is that the filmmakers address their audience in a way that is in many respects similar to Brean's approach to the American public. In both cases, the audience's conflicting priorities are exploited.



Wag the Dog is best described as a black comedy, presenting a highly cynical and at times morbid premise in a light and comedic tone. Brought in at the request of the President to manage the scandal, Brean hires Hollywood producer Stanly Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to 'produce' a fictitious war against Albania, with White House staffer Winfred Ames (Anne Heche) also involved in the deepening spiral of misinformation. The film was adapted David Mamet and Hilary Henkin from the novel *American Hero* by Larry Beinhart, which featured George HW Bush as the president embroiled in scandal. It was directed by Hollywood veteran Barry Levinson, best known for his film *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987).

Wag the Dog can be seen as an exemplar of what film scholars have referred to as the classical Hollywood style, although

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with a slight twist. In classical Hollywood narrative, characters function as causes; they are clearly motivated to solve a well-defined problem and act according to psychological traits that are evident and generally consistent. The structure of the classical Hollywood film follows a pattern or format that begins with the establishment of a status quo, which is followed by a disruption, and then by the protagonist's attempts to restore order by overcoming a set of obstacles. The protagonist's efforts result in a resolution that enables a satisfactory ending to the narrative. *Wag the Dog* is a protagonist-driven story that employs a realist visual style and resolves with a very neat closure of all of the narrative questions it opens. The protagonist, Conrad Brean, has a clear and consistent set of psychological traits that make the chain of causality driving the film believable. He pursues his goals single-mindedly, in a manner consistent with the traits established early in the film. The twist is not only that Brean is a criminal who operates above the law but also that, in achieving his goals, he actually undermines the legitimacy of the very institution he seeks to protect. In this sense, Brean is more of an anti-hero than a hero, and so is somewhat at odds with the classical Hollywood protagonist. Importantly, many of the conventions used to represent Brean would also be used for that of the classical hero, as we shall see, and it is these that will work to make us sympathetic towards a character whose actions are deplorable.

Power and persuasion

The opening scenes features Brean arriving at the White House, where he is informed that the President has been accused of sexual indiscretions with an under-age girl. The scene establishes the temporal and physical setting of the film, and two of its three central characters: Brean and Ames. The setting is

familiar from political thrillers, TV shows like *The West Wing*, and sci-fi and disaster films: one of the White House's secure underground meeting rooms where emergencies are managed. We learn that the accusation of the 'Firefly Girl', due to go to press the following day, comes two weeks before the election to determine whether the President will be returned to the White House for a second term. Brean's goal is to ensure that the President is re-elected, regardless of the scandal (which Brean appears indifferent to). His plan is to use the press – the 'jackals', as he refers to them – to distract the American voters' attention away from the sex scandal by creating a more urgent crisis that taps into their patriotic urges.

As an audience, we are aligned with Brean's point of view from the opening shot, and we become more emotionally invested in his success as we go. This is the case even if we find ourselves morally opposed to the President's behaviour. And there are two very important strategies the filmmakers use to align us with Brean: to make us like Brean, and to make us identify closely with his goals. The first of these is accomplished through casting and characterisation. Brean is played by Academy Award-winning actor Robert De Niro, famous for portraying a number of anti-hero characters, notably the young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather: Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). This casting choice leads us to make certain assumptions about Brean, including that he may well be a morally ambiguous character whom we nonetheless want to succeed. In addition to casting, Brean is shown to possess a number of character traits that make him immediately likeable to us as an audience. For one, he is very good at what he does. Ames tells her colleagues (and us) that the President asked for him by name: 'Get Conrad Brean.' Someone whom the most powerful man on Earth asks for by name has got to be special, and we want to know why: what is he good at and how does he do it? Brean is not only powerful but also the smartest guy in the room (and he makes sure others know it by addressing them as 'kids'). When he snaps, the President's staff get him \$20,000 and a car; they are clearly at his disposal. All of these elements work to align us with Brean. We are intrigued by him and want to know how he is going to achieve his goals. Even though what he is doing is at best morally dubious, we still want him to succeed.

The fact that viewers are positioned so closely alongside Brean is not accidental, but rather results from the way in which the filmmakers structure the story. Our alignment with Brean – which by extension is an alignment with the President – works against what might be our more natural response: disgust at the President's behaviour, and at the way his spin doctor is able to manipulate the press and the public so successfully. Our conflict as an audience is exploited in a similar manner to the conflict that Brean himself exploits in the American public. On the one hand, Americans are rightly appalled by the President's behavior; on the other, consideration of moral issues must evidently be suspended in light of a potential terrorist attack on US soil.

The event at the centre of the film, then, is that of a President not only breaking the law in the very seat of his power but also transgressing a significant moral boundary. Brean's goal is to split the voting public's concern by creating a more pressing





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matter. This is the crux of the film and of the central conflict it represents. Just as the American voters are split between their response to the President's alleged behavior in the film and the higher priority of national security, so are we, the viewers of the film, positioned to feel a conflict between our response to Brean's fraudulent war on the one hand and our desire for him to actually pull it off on the other. This is both a major achievement for the filmmaker, and a warning to their audience regarding the state of democracy in America.

The crisis Brean creates evolves into the purported threat of a nuclear terrorist attack on US soil and a fraudulent war with the supposed perpetrators: an Albanian political faction. Brean's plan is to manufacture a credible threat, and then to keep the threat and the President's response to it at the top of the news agenda for two weeks. By doing so, he can distract the American public's attention from the scandal and bring about the President's re-election.

Brean's eye view

The second strategy used by the filmmakers to align us with Brean has to do with the way in which the story is told, and the perspective on the events we are offered. Put simply, the audience of *Wag the Dog* is virtually forced into alignment with Brean and his goals. This is done by not allowing any significant perspective outside of Brean's with which the audience might identify, nor space within the story to contemplate other perspectives. Consider for a moment the response in the first scene to the accusation made by the Firefly Girl. The discussion is short-circuited by Brean's immediate rejection of even the need to entertain the truth of the claim: 'What difference does it make if it's true? It's a story and [if] it breaks, they'll have to run with it.' We are given no time or space to reflect, but are immediately swept up in the narrative momentum. Or at least, we are meant to be.

The mode of storytelling employed through the vast majority of *Wag the Dog* is what scholars call restricted narration. Restricted narration limits what viewers know by presenting them with the perspective – and thus limited knowledge – of one particular character, usually the protagonist. This is the case in *Wag the Dog*, where the viewer's knowledge is restricted almost entirely to what Brean knows, with a few minor exceptions. We are with Brean at almost all times. We only know what he knows, and only see what he sees. In this way, the audience could be said to suffer something like Stockholm syndrome, the psychological state of a kidnapped person who has begun to take the side of their kidnapper. We begin to identify with and take the side of the manipulator, who may in fact be our enemy.

Restricted narration can be understood in contrast to omniscient narration, in which the viewer sees more, hears more and knows more than any of the characters can or do know. Omniscient narration offers a godlike perspective on the world of the story, and means that viewers are ahead of the characters in terms of knowledge. It often functions to provide audiences with information they do not have in order to create certain effects. In *Wag the Dog*, there are only three very brief shifts to an omniscient perspective. These are used to create

anxiety for audiences in relation to Brean and Ames. In one such scene, near the film's halfway point, Brean and Ames are detained by the CIA. Immediately afterwards, the audience is shown a brief conversation between two CIA agents who know that Brean and Ames have completely manufactured the terrorist threat and the war. They discuss whether they will take them into custody or release them to the FBI. In this way, the CIA seems to pose a genuine threat to Brean and the accomplishment of goals. With the power of the law on their side, they would seem to have the upper hand. Importantly, we are positioned to believe them, and to fear for Brean and Ames. The threat, however, proves to be a red herring. Brean turns the tables on the CIA, demonstrating his power and the fact that he operates not only outside the law, but indeed above it. He asserts both his power and intelligence, and the agents are left in fear of him, in a complete reversal of audience expectations. The brief foray outside the boundaries of narration restricted to Brean's perspective makes us temporarily anxious, but ultimately serves to reinforce our alignment with him.

Manipulating conflict

My goal has been to analyse *Wag the Dog* by focusing on the parallels between two sets of conflicting perspectives that are explored in and created by the film. The first is that of the people of the US and their conflicted attitude towards a President who has been accused of sexual misconduct just weeks before an election. The film shows how voters are persuaded to ignore the scandal through the creation of a pseudo-crisis that takes priority over petty issues of morality, ultimately assuring his re-election. The second conflict is that of the film's audience and its relationship with Conrad Brean, the brilliant

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strategist who makes possible the impossible, and ensures the re-election of a President plagued by a scandal that seemed to prove his inadequacy for high public office.

In considering these conflicts my goal has been to consider the questions of how we, as an audience, are distracted from our own seemingly natural emotional response to the President's sexual misconduct. It has also been to consider how the filmmakers use the tools of their craft to align us with Brean, a character engaged in such dubious behavior, up to and including the murder of Stanley Motss at the end of film. My argument is that the filmmakers treat their audience in a manner similar to how Brean treats the American public – distracting us from the real issue by emotionally involving us in a drama with high stakes, and closely aligning us with a likeable but morally reprehensible character. The obstacles he faces are numerous, but he overcomes each and every one of them with the composure, resolve and intelligence that define him. In both conflicts and on both levels of analysis, an audience's ambivalence is exploited to great effect.

The story is structured in such a way as to situate its audience in sympathetic relationship to Brean, and by extension, the President, and by preventing meaningful engagement with ethical issues in the process. It is only when the film is over and we walk away and think about it that we have the space in which to make any meaningful ethical judgements.

As a successful work of black comedy, *Wag the Dog* makes it harder for those who buy its message to believe that we live in a fully functioning democratic society. Given the political

manipulation that followed in the aftermath the 9/11 attacks, it appears to be no less relevant today than in the Clinton era. Levinson's film exposes mechanisms that can be used to deceive us, eroding our ability to engage in what appears to be the fiction of democracy prevalent in our time. The sad truth that the filmmakers seek to demonstrate is that these strategies work, and that our present political system is significantly weakened by the lack of a rigorous and independent press corps, as well as by the presence of powerful and extremely well-funded behind-the-scenes operatives such as Brean.

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