

Feature article on wag the dog (full marks) essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Those In Power Own The Truth

What is truth? As Marcus Aurelius said “ Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth”. If all truth is simply a matter of perspective, then this perspective can be manipulated. Levinson proves in his film ‘ Wag the Dog’ that we need look no farther than the media to find elements of this manipulation. Is he correct? The fact that Levinson was able to exactly predict the Lewinsky scandal of 1998 before it happened reinforces his point tenfold. But what exactly is Levinson trying to tell us through his film, and are there current examples of this manipulation?

The purpose of Levinson’s film, in his own words, was to “ Raise public awareness about the dissemination of false information”. He did this in the aftermath of the Gulf war, and makes specific reference to it. He portrays war as “ show business”. In the scene where Conrad is convincing Stanley to produce the ‘ pageant’ that is war, Levinson uses very quick editing of iconic war images. These flashing images are combined with Conrad’s elaboration on the obscurity of truth. This causes the audience to question the validity of the flashing images (including the five marines raising the flag and the Churchill ‘ V’ for victory) and how their feelings towards the war were manipulated by them. Conrad says of the gulf war “ 2500 missions a day.

One hundred days. One video... We shot that footage in a studio.” When asked by Stanley to confirm if that was true, Conrad says “ How do we know?” The hyper realistic form of dialogue compounds the stark realism of Levinson’s message. The combined effect of these techniques and allusions is to sow doubt about the legitimacy of the media’s techniques. Levinson is

quick to demonstrate how the media can manipulate truth, but who owns the truth is slightly more ambiguous.

Instead of simply portraying the powerful president as owning the truth, *Wag the Dog* questions who is actually in power. This is done through the characterisation of Conrad Brean. Levinson gives Conrad immense power, often using high angle shots in his portrayal, and making him appear calm in all situations. When Conrad is confronted with the FBI, whilst Winnie becomes frantic and panicked, he remains very calm and talks himself out of the situation. Levinson also presents power in the form of the incredibly egotistical Stanley Motss, whose house is “ Bigger than the white house”. This comparison is a humorous lampoon of where the true power lies, and *Wag the Dog* postulates that it is definitely not with the president. Conrad’s instructions are relayed second hand by Winnie to the president, who does everything he says. This is particularly pertinent when whilst watching a presidential speech, Conrad says “ What do you want him to say?” and then the audience watches as his instructions are followed. The president even has secondary influence to Motss, who argues with him over the kind of kitten to use in an advertisement. Whilst this is humorous, it also implies that the president has no power. But who has the power then? It isn’t the president, though he benefits from the manipulation of the truth, and Conrad demonstrates even he is not omnipotent when the war is ended by the CIA. So who owns the truth? *Wag the Dog* appears to suggest that it is fought over by those in power- that public thought is simply a prize to be won.

This idea is even more terrifying when the real life versions of this manipulation are discovered. The ' Stop Online Piracy Act' was attacked for being another way those in power could own the truth. The manipulation of ideas by Stephanie Moore in her speech to congress is demonstrative of how those in power manipulate the truth to control public opinion. This bending of the truth is extracted by Mike Masnik in his 2012 Article " Failure to Pass puts Internet at Risk". Moore claims in her speech that " Netizens poisoned the well, and as a result the reliability of the internet is at risk", making use of powerful metaphoric language to embellish her point. Moore does not enumerate how this is so, so her use of the violent imagery of poisoning is really a scare tactic. In his first person attack which makes use of everyday rhetoric, Masnik points out the fallacy of the statement, saying " The entire sentence is incredibly insulting...millions of people expressing their political opinion is ' poisoning the well' ". Again, Mike uses emotive language and appeals to the masses in his attack on Moore. In this manner he remedies the damage done by her truth bending and gives power to the more powerless.

Masnik also attacks the clever truth bending which Moore uses in her statement " Most countries in the world already have this option at their disposal to deal with this problem. " Instead of using emotive language, Masnik challenges her facts, saying " Only 13 countries enable DNS blocking...including China, Russia... Uzbekistan and Yemen...which is not a list we want to be added to". He also challenges Moore's very definite statement that copyright does not mean censorship, providing a specific example of

how it was used to stifle political speech in Russia. So Masnik is a hero of the truth then? Not necessarily, his article is definitely biased, but at least he uses facts (unlike Moore). Hence it can be seen that Moore carefully chooses her words in order to package the truth, in a similar manner to Conrad Brean's marketing of the war.

This 'marketing' is an integral part of the way power is wielded to create the truth. In one particular scene of *Wag the Dog*, Willie Nelson under the direction of Stanley Motz compose the 'theme song' of their way. This song "We guard our American Borders" is a parody of songs such as "We are the World" by Michael Jackson, which are an appeal to public sentiment. As Willie Nelson played a part in "We are the World" his involvement in the parody creates verisimilitude. The use of the the song is obviously intended to be ironic, as shown in the line "We have a right to fight for democracy...to keep our country free". The true destroyers of the ideals of democracy and the freedom of the people are those composing the song and manipulating the people! The entire 'threat' of Albania is a sham, and the corny lyrics ring empty and hollow. Thus Levinson parodies the ways in which empty gestures such as the song can be used to manipulate the truth. Only those in power have enough money to create these gestures, making them just another way those in power own the truth.

So who owns the truth? According to Levinson, as supported by reality, it's those in power. These powerful people use manipulative techniques such as careful choosing of language or empty, but emotion inducing gestures to package the truth. In the case of *Wag the Dog* it is an outright lie that is

packaged, but in reality involves the subtle bending of the truth. However, the verisimilitude between Wag the Dog and a reality obviously keen to imitate it makes us question how much of this 'truth' we have not questioned, and exactly how much of it is a lie.