Module C – Representation and Text
Conflicting Perspectives develops your ability to ‘explore various representations of events, personalities or situations.’ It also requires you to ‘evaluate how the medium of production, textual form, perspective and choice of language influence meaning’ (p 52 Syllabus Document).

_Wag the Dog_, like all the texts in this module, positions students to develop their understanding of the concepts concerned, including the relationship between the composer, their context, the context of the text and the targeted audience, by comparing, contrasting and evaluating conflicting perspectives. The study includes researching and integrating a variety of related texts from ‘a range of genres and media’ (p 52 Syllabus Document).

It is important to consider and reflect knowledge of the rubric of the Prescriptions as well as the Syllabus in all assessment tasks including the HSC examination. Focus analysis on how ‘_the choice of textual forms, features, and language shape meaning and influence responses_.’ (p 22 English Stage 6. Prescriptions)

_Wag the Dog_ provides significant insights into the influence of media on political outcomes nationally and internationally. Therefore we consider the ‘relationship between representation and meaning’ in many countries, specifically the USA. Who are Barry Levinson’s intended audience and what is his purpose? It is essential we consider that we are responding to Levinson’s perspective only because he has excluded conflicting perspectives of the relationship between the media and politics.

What then is our role, the internal or external audience? Are we a variation or hybrid somewhere between the two? Similarly, how have the composers of related texts manipulated textual forms and features to shape our responses to conflicting perspectives of events, situations and personalities? What conflicting perspectives have been withheld? This film is a satire and therefore employs a variety of satirical conventions including inversion, exaggerations and non-sequitur, adopting perspectives Levinson intends to be catalysts for questions, even rejection of the status quo in relation to personalities, events or situations explored in the text.

What I need to know for _Wag the Dog_
WAG THE DOG AND MODULE C

In order to study *Wag the Dog* effectively and fulfil the requirements of the module, students need to know the issues/perspectives conveyed by the text, how these issues are conveyed and how to select a suitable related text.

**Wag the Dog – context, issues and representation**

**Satire**

The literary genre that uses irony, wit, and sometimes sarcasm to expose humanity’s vices and foibles, giving impetus to change or reform through ridicule. ...satire may generate laughter but essentially has a moral purpose.  
*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms. R. Murfin, S.M. Ray, p 357*

“Why does a dog wag its tail? Because if the tail were smarter the tail would wag the dog.” Levinson's purpose is to focus our attention on manipulation of the public to accept one perspective without consulting or evaluation of other conflicting perspectives of the event, personality or situation in question.

Released in 1998 during the Presidential term of Bill Clinton and during the scandal over Monica Lewinski, the team responsible for *Wag the Dog* would have been aware of rumours but the scandal did not break until after the film’s release. It is ironic that Clinton had considered declaring war against Iraq while engaged in the battle to save his presidency before he faced impeachment proceedings.

**Audiences**

The conflicting representations of reality and media spin were designed to appeal to a popular audience and resonate with American audiences familiar with the power of film and media. Therefore Levinson includes talk back programs hosted by Jay Leno or traditional country and western music by Willie Nelson (Johnny Green) which endorses American family values, including patriotism and courage.

**Engaging the audience**

Motss is represented as a genius in gauging the mood and the foibles of his audience. It is ironic that he increasingly loses track of reality, becoming lost in his own fantasy. His childish persistence in claiming credit for his production and determination to master mind the Inauguration are the catalysts of his fate. His death is foreshadowed by Brean’s smiling warning to the actress in the Albanian war victim sequence that if she speaks of her role she will die. Motss’ fate is also foreshadowed by the situation involving Brean, Ames and the CIA, which Brean diffuses.

Arguably, Motss is a victim of America’s fascination with film and media, as much as he is a victim of his ego and failure to differentiate between success and morality. The value of media and spin in dominating a gullible general public is represented by his lavish lifestyle and arrogant attitude. His appeal lies in his almost childlike enthusiasm and faith in Brean’s loyalty and support.

**Representation of political scene and ritual**

Ritual and ceremony remain significant aspects of media spin, exploiting pathos during war and natural disasters. Levinson satirises the audience’s gullibility effectively throughout the film, as Motss’ audience is skilfully manipulated out of questioning the President’s dubious morality and the scandal of the ‘firefly girl’. Examples include: Motss’ tableau captured on TV news, when the President is presented with a symbolic sheaf of wheat by the small girl and wraps his coat around the weeping old woman and the pageantry and religious significance of the military funeral for the triumphant dead hero, Old Shoe.

### Relationships in *Wag the Dog*

- **Brean**
- **President**
- **Motss**
- **public**
- **internal audience**
- **external audience**

**Exercise: Interpreting mind map**

Interpret and explain the relationships on this mind map.
Setting – Levinson’s America
Levinson contrasts the motivations of Brean and Motss, respectively, despite their shared perspectives of media and the importance of spin. Brean is amoral in his focus on the President’s re-election. Motss is equally indifferent to morality but motivated by personal ambition and oblivious of the dangerous ramifications of his privileged knowledge of the reality behind the fantasy. Together they represent the President as the noble all-American hero, protector of freedom.

Power of the people
Significantly, all parties including the political opposition, Senator Neal, rely on the love of the people to obtain or retain power. Levinson reminds us that all political dominance depends on winning the support and loyalty of the citizens. The public are shown to be motivated by misguided loyalty but value freedom, honesty and courage, values that make them vulnerable to being easily duped. However, Wag the Dog reminds us that the people are as fickle as they are gullible.

Imagery, symbols and allusions
- Contextual references provide humour and verisimilitude through media personalities such as Jay Leno (playing himself) or famous entertainers like Willie Nelson, represented as Johnny Green.
- The President’s address consisting of Motss’ ghost-written speech, appeals to pathos and avoids logos or ethos. The successful appeal to family values and American patriotism among the invited audience is satirised by the open-mouthed disbelief of the spin team, including Brean and Ames, when this audience exit the room in tears, a microcosm of the external audience.
- The symbolic use of the American flag draped around the body of the purported war hero is symbolic of the naivety and gullibility of the public.
- The exterior and public chambers of the White House symbolise the values of freedom, democracy and honesty. The bunker interior or planning room creates a tension with these ideals by representing these perspectives as perverted by political expediency. Levinson also has Brean et al cynically position the President in front of the statue of Abraham Lincoln to allude to similar values, which are conspicuously and ironically lacking in the venial President.
- The manipulation of the blue screen construction of the war in Albania, including the incongruity of the calico cat/bag of chips is also a microcosm of the power of the media to manufacture truth from fiction.

Who is in control of perspective?
As the director, Levinson makes decisions about the film in order to position us, the audience, to a particular point of view. His characters, Brean and Motss, represent different aspects of the filmmaking world, with Brean being very much the producer and Motss the director. Brean's role is connected more obviously to the political arena as seen when he engages in dispute with the CIA, but he is also connected to the media in organising the distribution of information. Motss' perspective is more closely concerned with the audience, as he sees his product as having a direct effect.

Levinson is positioned outside the text to critically evaluate media representation and/or political perspectives. His is a justifiable concern in America, where voting is not compulsory. His perspective, that politics is largely an amoral pursuit of power abetted by the media, dominates the structure, plot, characterisations and film techniques. Media are represented as willing pawns and therefore we as audiences have to remain politically active and not succumb to cynicism and apathy.

Conflicting Perspectives in *Wag the Dog*

Some of the perspectives that students can consider are:

- Conflict between political and ethical agendas.
- A political agenda that purports to value patriotism, honour, duty, courage, freedom from tyranny and equality, but in reality is to retain power.
- Reality – knowledge and memory cannot be eradicated, but distraction and spin can avert or delay negative ramifications of the present.
- Self-interest dominates. There is no real loyalty.
- Revelation and concealment – honesty is avoided. Concealment and spin are the goals.
- Privileged perspectives – winning at whatever the cost. Might is right.
- Context – historical, political and cultural.
- Voice – sense of person and point of view are contrasted in the personas of Conrad Brean and Stanley Motss.
- Value for rhetoric and iconic visual imagery
- Symbolic use of imagery – the calico kitten, the Albanian victim, Old Shoe, the home grown hero.

Conflicting Perspectives of Personalities, Events, Situations

### Conflicting Perspectives of Personalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict perspectives</th>
<th>The President</th>
<th>Old Shoe</th>
<th>Brean</th>
<th>Motss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faceless presence – puppet</td>
<td>Indiscreet and predatory sexual dalliance</td>
<td>Psychotic rapist who attacked a nun</td>
<td>Ruthless, amoral, cynical and arrogant</td>
<td>Ambitious, amoral and hubristic – repeated attempts to ensure fame for the job done</td>
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<td>Caring and noble leader – media news flash of President with young Albanian girl and grandmother, directed by Motss</td>
<td>Noble war hero – news flashes, brainchild of Motss and Brean, product in promotion of shoes and 'shoeburgers'</td>
<td>Mr Fix-it – pleasant, low-key political consultant, unwaveringly loyal to President, opening sequence</td>
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</table>
Exercise: A perspectives table
Consider the following events and situations and organise them into a table that shows the different perspectives (you may need to add information and evidence).

Conflicting Perspectives of events
- News flashes of war in Albania – planning scenes, production scenes and use of blue screen, calico kitten, rape victim and the CIA's knowledge.
- Discovery of Old Shoe, appearance as hero, message to Mom, record of Old Shoe ‘found’ in Library of Congress, death and funeral – reality of planning and brainstorming with spin team, creation of song with Johnny Green and choir, plane ride, crash and rape of Susie, death of Schumann against the reality.

Conflicting Perspectives of situations
- Initial situation of breaking scandal of 'firefly girl' in news flashes – reality of team, including Brean, developing diversion in bunker.
- Initial intervention of CIA, interrogation of Brean and Ames, Brean bluffing his way out – news of war ending, double-crossed by CIA using the Albanian Government – Motss determined to continue with Act 2.
- Death of Old Shoe – converted into media event of military funeral with diversion lasting until President's ratings secured.
- Attitudes to the media – as a controlling source or a source that can be controlled.
- Attitude to the public – as those in power or those who are manipulated.
- Internal/external audience and their relationship
- Reality and truth.
- Motss' ambition apparently rewarded with promise of recognition – reality of Brean's call to organise Motss 'tragic death.'

Exercise: Perspectives and visual representation
Use the diagram below to build a visual representation of the relationships between the different perspectives in the film. Add more information to the boxes outside the inner circle.
How techniques convey conflicting perspectives
A necessary focus for students must be how the composer’s choices in medium and content represent ideas and how these choices influence meaning. Levinson effectively uses a variety of satirical conventions, including dramatic irony to position the audience by making us privy to the reality behind the spin.

Notetaking exercise
Students can use the table below to organise ideas and notes.

|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|

Related texts
Responses should always address and synthesise related texts. The student’s ability to effectively integrate core and related texts can be a discriminator between a good and an excellent response.

Contemporary events, situations and personalities that can be used for related texts include:
- The media controversy surrounding Murdoch
- Unrest in Libya or Egypt or Syria
- Tibet – religious dissent
- Iraq war – Saddam Hussein weapons of mass destruction
- Detention centres – Guantanamo
- Mandatory detention, locations and policies
- Carbon tax.

In selecting their related text, students should be aware of the dominant themes or concerns including:
- Democracy/Freedom
- Integrity/Duty
- Ambition/Loyalty

- Truth/spin.
- How does Levinson represent conflicting perspectives of events, situations and personalities in the medium of film?
- How does he use satirical conventions to convey his perspectives?
- What values are emphasised? What values are exploited? Why? How?
- How do the composers of your related texts represent conflicting perspectives of events, situations and personalities in their chosen medium?
- What are the links between the texts?

Exercise: Related texts and notetaking
Students can create a note taking table as above to analyse their related text, focusing on the features of their chosen text type – TV, print medium, visual text, documentary, biography, play, novel, short story, etc.

They should ask themselves:
- How does the composer’s choice of medium influence meaning?
- How is the responder positioned? Why?
- How consistently have I made connections between the personalities, events, situations of Wag the Dog and my related text?
- What are specific links between the core and related texts? Remember that these do not have to be similar, but can contrast means of representation, meaning and purpose.
- How well have I synthesised my arguments, examples and analysis of the representations?

Exercise: Creating a mind map
- Consider developing a mind map of sequences or scenes that reflect the shifts in power and build tension. Include use of film techniques and satirical conventions.
- Create a mind map which develops links between Wag the Dog and your related texts.

Exercise: Quotations and conflicting perspectives
Explain where each quotation comes in the film. What perspective does each of these quotations suggest? Does the quotation deal with a personality, event or situation?
WAG THE DOG AND MODULE C

- ‘That’s him … that’s Mr Fixit.’ (Ames)
- ‘I’m working on it.’ (Brean’s catch phrase)
- ‘What difference does it make, if it’s true? It’s a story and if breaks they’ve got to run with it.’
- ‘It’s nothing to do with the B-3 Bomber.’
- ‘Deny, deny, deny’
- Cat to be “punched in later.” (Motss)
- ‘Well, actually, no. You can’t tell anyone you did this.’
- ‘They could come to your house and kill you.” (Brean)
- ‘God Bless the men of the 303… on land or on the sea. We’re the fighting men of the 303.’ (Song)
- ‘I’ve started to feel it’s my thing.’
- ‘It’s the best work I’ve ever done in my life because it’s so honest. I want the credit.’
- ‘We’re not declaring war, we haven’t declared war since the second world war. We’re going to war’.
- ‘Schumann is the shock, he is Jaws… produce him after the election.’
- ‘This is nothing. In the old days. This is nothing. This is just a walk in the park.’
- ‘What is better than a triumphant homecoming?’

Practice extended response topics

1. How is Levinson’s context of 20th century America and his concern with political apathy and media cynicism reflected in the:
   - Characterisation of Brean, Motss, Winfred Ames, Johnny Green, the internal audience
   - Structure of the plot
   - Language used by each character?

2. Wag the Dog addresses current and context-specific issues. Discuss with detailed reference to the film and two related texts.

3. Choose a current socio-political context, situation, event or personality and write a feature article, speech or interview about it. Analyse representations of conflicting perspectives in the chosen text and develop a consistent and clear synthesis with Wag the Dog.

4. Write an interview with an Australian author of political documentaries for TV. Focus on his/her choice of structure, style and intended audience. The interview should demonstrate your knowledge of Module C – Conflicting Perspectives and Levinson’s Wag the Dog.

Resources

Board of Studies NSW Prescriptions: Area of Study Electives and Texts Higher School Certificate 2009–2012

AREA OF STUDY AND EXTENSION 2 STUDENT DAY
MONDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2011
WESLEY CENTRE, PITT STREET SYDNEY

Students – Area of Study $40 (GST free), Students – Extension 2 $25 (GST free)
Students – whole day $60 (GST free). Teachers accompanying a group of at least 3 students are free of charge. Members not accompanying students $85 (Inc GST).
Non-Members not accompanying students $190 (Inc GST/ETA membership)

Keynote speaker: Simon Palomares

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