The cinema has been at the centre of life in the 20th century — and it will continue to be in the next century. Movies tell us stories about places never seen and people never met; they bring us together and keep us apart; they help us to remember childhood and to dream about the future; they tell us about each other and they sometimes even help us to understand the places we call home.

For all these reasons, and many more besides, Pacific Cinémathèque introduces the Film Study Guides Program, a collection of primers for teachers and students which examine contemporary movies through the lens of film and media education.

The study guides, while independent of each other, are linked together by a love for the cinema and a desire to create critical examinations of how contemporary films affect our lives. More than seven decades ago the Russian filmmaker Vsevold Pudovkin grasped the power of cinema for educators. He wrote: “Film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.” As the 20th century ends and the 21st begins, this remains true and now with the introduction of film and media studies into the Canadian secondary and elementary school curricula, an opportunity exists to explore Pudovkin’s lesson.

The Film Study Guides Program provides teachers with critical tools to examine and discuss a range of new Canadian and international films in the context of various grade levels and discipline areas. Each study guide refers to provincial secondary school curricula through concepts drawn from media education, by which we mean: the critical examination of how the media affects the world and our place in it.

Pacific Cinémathèque is Western Canada’s leading centre for the study and appreciation of contemporary cinema and while we gratefully acknowledge the support of our sponsors and partners, the Film Study Guides Program is an editorially independent program of the Cinémathèque.

We look forward to hearing from teachers and students throughout the country who use these guides and welcome comments which can help to improve our packages.

Stuart Poyntz
Pacific Cinémathèque
SATIRE AND WAG THE DOG

Satire is described as: “A literary work ridiculing identifiable objects in real life, thus seeking to arouse in the reader [or viewer] contempt for its object... [It] is sometimes distinguished from comedy on the grounds that satire aims to correct by ridiculing while comedy aims simply to evoke amusement” (A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic and Cinematic Terms).

Wag the Dog is clearly a satirical film and if satire is an attempt to ridicule and make fun of objects, people or things in real life, then this movie has its sights set on at least two targets.

In Section I: The Title, we examined how Conrad Bream, Winifred Ames and Stanley Motts are wagging the dog in this film, and the question left for students was who then is the dog. The dog in this case would be the object of the film’s satirical attack.

If you skipped Section I, assess who in the film is the dog being wagged and discuss whether the film’s satirical attack on this target is fair.

Throughout the history of motion pictures, satire has been one of the sharpest tools available to filmmakers attempting to make a commentary on a particularly important theme or issue. One of the best examples of satire in the history of film is Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1963), but there are other more recent satirical films, including Michael Moore’s homage to Canada, Canadian Bacon (1995).

When satirical films work, it is often because the filmmaker has selected a topic which touches on an acute problem or concern in society at that time. Do you think Wag the Dog touches on acute problems in our society? Does the film offer any way of resolving these problems? Can you suggest any ways of resolving these problems?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


THEMES: THE TITLE

Themes are unifying ideas or motifs which are repeated or developed throughout a film or book. Most well-told stories, whether in print or on screen, contain one or more themes. In director Barry Levinson’s political and media satire, *Wag the Dog*, the movie’s title is clearly meant to draw attention to the film’s key theme: political and media manipulation.

As the film begins, Conrad Bream (played by Robert De Niro) is called in by Winifred Ames (played by Anne Heche) to create a diversion which will distract public and media attention away from a sex scandal threatening to undermine the president’s re-election campaign. To create the necessary diversion, Conrad turns to Stanley Motts (played by Dustin Hoffman), a Hollywood producer who proceeds to manufacture the videotape and storyline necessary to convince the public that America is going to war with Albania. Why a war with Albania? Because war is news and Albania is a country which few Americans know anything about, and yet its name sounds just sinister enough to create a sense of fear across the nation.

As the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that those wagging the dog in the film are the spin doctors: Conrad, Winnie and Stanley. They are responsible for creating the “Albanian war”, as well as for the music, images and stories about Old Shoe used in support of it. The war isn’t true, but if Conrad, Winnie and Stanley are wagging the dog, who is the dog?

**activity 01**

*It is clear in the film who is wagging the dog; however, who is the dog being wagged? Who is the target of the political and media manipulation orchestrated by Conrad, Winnie and Stanley?*

*“Change the story, change the lead” is Conrad Bream’s motto for how to handle the media in the midst of the sex scandal that threatens to undermine the president’s re-election campaign. What does the motto mean?*