re:generation quarterly

4.3, Winter 1998

Satire Verite

Film Review: ***Wag the Dog, Primary Colors* and *Bullworth***
by Jennifer Parker

Wag the Dog *directed by Barry Levinson (New Line Cinema, 1997), 97 minutes.*

Primary Colors *directed by Mike Nichols (Universal Pictures, 1998), 140 minutes.*

Bulworth *directed by Warren Beatty (20th Century Fox, 1998), 95 minutes.*

Long after Vince Foster, Whitewater, and Monica Lewinsky have faded from the attention of the politicians, the press, and the public, the Clinton presidency may be still be remembered for its gifts to Hollywood. In fact, 1998 could be remembered as the heyday of the fact-based political satire. And while allegedly crooked politicians and unquestionably corrupt systems are veterans to the dunking seat, films like Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog*, Mike Nichols's *Primary Colors*, and Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* made a splash that couldn't help but leave the audience wet.

This new crop of celluloid satires poke serious fun at our current political climate, where forestalling, covering up, or distracting from the truth have apparently become election-winning (or impeachment-dodging) strategies, and where idealism seems to have become a casualty of growing up, whether you are the candidate or the voter. If we laugh at the irony of a system where liars prosper, we must also laugh at ourselves, the lied-to. These biting political salvos question what truth is and just how we feel about it.

In *Wag the Dog*, the President of the United States is accused of molesting an underage visitor during a White House tour. His panicked aids bring in a master spin doctor to control the press and save the upcoming election. Enter Conrad Brean (Robert DeNiro), an odd mixture of cynicism and misplaced faith. Brean, whose credo states that truth is whatever people see and hear on TV, decides that the way to divert public attention from the scandal is to focus it on an international conflict. And since there is no national emergency at the moment, Brean hires a movie producer, Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to stage a war.

Brean and Motss randomly pick out Albania, taking for granted that most Americans won't know where, much less what, it is, and declare an escalation. Meanwhile the

President rushes out of the country on some obscure diplomatic errand. Motss brings in special effects technicians, actors, a befuddled composer (Willie Nelson), and an entire Hollywood production crew to create the illusion on a grand scale. They create news segments giving highlights of the war, write patriotic songs to stir the hearts of the American people, and create characters to play upon the heartstrings of the voting public—including a heroic prisoner of war who sends encouraging messages home to his mother. The whole scenario, while funny, has a disturbing ring of plausibility for those of us who remember watching the highly rated drama called "The Gulf War" on television.

Motss goes for emotional impact, as when he hires a young actress to play an Albanian war refugee. In one scene they film her running across a bridge with her white kitten in her arms as bombshells destroy the village around her. Of course, we see that the actress is really running across a soundstage, while kitten, rubble, and explosions are all superimposed with computers. The only time the girl is in real danger is after the shoot, when Brean explains that she cannot put this acting job on her resume, or tell anyone about it because "we'd have to kill you."

Levinson's film, while billed as a comedy, has the potential to rankle the thoughtful moviegoer. It exaggerates, one hopes, the credulity of the public, but one wonders whether it exaggerates the callous attitude of the powerful toward truth. For Brean and the rest of the President's staff, as well as for the political opposition, the truth is an inconvenience to be overcome; the primary objective is to create a believable lie and exploit it.

As in *Wag the Dog*, the interplay of truth and fiction in and around the film *Primary Colors* gets pretty intricate. Depending on who you ask, the movie is an adaptation of a novel by formerly "anonymous" political writer Joe Klein, or a barely fictionalized drama based on the 1992 Clinton campaign. Of course, the names have been changed to protect the "innocent," but between the sharply defined and evocative characters of Klein's book, and John Travolta's Clintonesque performance as Governor Jack Stanton, there is little doubt who the character models were.

Primary Colors gives an insider's look at politics from the point of view of an idealistic young aid, Henry Burton (Adrian Lester). Henry has become jaded by disingenuous politicians, almost to the point of leaving politics altogether. More or less unwillingly, he signs on to the Stanton campaign, and begins to gauge the character and sincerity of the man whose nomination he is working to secure.

Stanton is portrayed as a warm, engaging, energetic politician, sincerely caring but also sincerely bent on getting elected, and not without some of the vices we have come to associate with the current president. As Henry gets to know Stanton, we see hints of lechery, duplicity, callous self-interest, and pampered arrogance, but it is so swathed in Southern charm and all that goes with it that we find ourselves, like Henry, at once repulsed and seduced. When Stanton teases in that raspy, confidential drawl, it is hard to see anything other than a good ol' boy who loves good food, good company, and most of all, his mama.

Then scandal erupts in the form of allegations of sexual impropriety from a sort of Gennifer Flowers-with-audio-tape. Another jaded idealist (or idealistic jade?) is brought into the Stanton camp, Libby Holden (Kathy Bates), an investigator who uses her forceful personality, and occasionally a big gun, to gather information that will help the Stantons and hurt the opposition. But like Henry, Libby needs to believe that she is on the side of honor, and when events and the Stantons' actions do not bear this out, a moral crisis ensues. Through Henry and Libby the film asks questions of principle: how do we react when we find out we have believed in a liar? Is it naive to ask that those who lead us live up to a higher moral code? And in order to grow up, do we have to find a livable space between our ideals and compromise with fallen "reality"?

For some the alternative to growing up is a breakdown. In B*ulworth* we meet a man who has failed to find that livable space between his early ideals and his midlife crisis of conscience. Days before an election, Senator J. Billington Bulworth (Warren Beatty) sits incumbent in his office on Capitol Hill, watching his campaign commercials, in which he spouts family values rhetoric and racial code in the interest of winning white middle class votes. On the walls around him are pictures from his more liberal past, juxtaposing him with civil rights leaders and populist figures. As he interacts with his staff and his wife, he seems strangely vacant, and we find out that the Senator has neither eaten nor slept in days. He has all the symptoms of a man deeply—suicidally—depressed.

The first interest we see Bulworth take in his personal affairs is when he meets with an insurance lobbyist and makes a shady deal: a favorable vote on a particular bill in exchange for a ten million dollar life insurance policy, payable to Bulworth's daughter upon his death. After securing this transaction, Bulworth next arranges to have himself assassinated while campaigning on the weekend before election day.

Ironically, from the moment the reality of his impending death sets in, Bulworth starts coming to life. He suddenly recognizes a new freedom to tell the truth, and takes his first opportunity behind a microphone to toss aside his speechwriter's smarmy bridge-building hype, instead targeting the corrupt electoral process and the overwhelming influence of wealth on politicians. Later, at a stop in a black South Central Los Angeles neighborhood church, Bulworth drops any pretense of political correctness and tells his black audience that they have no power because they are poor, and nobody on Capitol Hill cares much about making the promised changes in their community. "Basically we told you what you wanted to hear and forgot all about it," he says. Moreover, "If you people don't put down the chicken wings and malt liquor and get behind somebody besides a running back who stabbed his wife, you're never going to get rid of somebody like me."

And he is a hit. Bulworth's outrageous candor makes him an instant populist hero to the voiceless, an annoyance to the wealthy and powerful, and an anomaly to the media, all of whom are bemused by his new "tell-it-like-it-is" platform. Meanwhile, Bulworth develops an infatuation with a young black woman, Nina (Halle Berry), and begins dodging the bullet that he has set in motion. Wanting now to live and to

continue his crusade, Bulworth follows Nina on an odyssey through the black community, adopting ideas and idioms along the way.

He picks up rap music as his new mode of expression, and begins to make media appearances in which he is more and more provocatively honest about race, class, inequality, corruption, and power-brokering in politics. Often he seems to be channeling more than speaking for himself, and from time to time we hear his rap echoing another character's take on what is wrong with America, as when Bulworth appears on television wearing gangsta-rap garb, and uses an angry drug dealer's words, almost verbatim, to decry the lack of economic and social opportunity available to urban black youths.

In this comic fantasy a man in a political seat becomes the voice of conscience, a truth teller, a hero to those muted voices he makes heard, and, consequently, an enemy to those whose corrupt machinations he exposes. In reality, one wonders how much more quickly a character like Bulworth would get shut down by the powers that be.

Such films, coming at a time in America's history when the relationship between the truth, media, and politics is at its strangest, give us an opportunity to look at ourselves. As the voters, the consumers, the viewers, and sometimes the victims known as the public, we have the difficult job of deciding what and whom to believe, and how to act accordingly. If we are to find a livable space between our decisions and the consequences, it is good to have satire at our disposal. Perhaps when we see our reality as equally or even more absurd than any comic fictionalization, we will be provoked to change it. After all, as Alexander Pope once declared, "Those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous."

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