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Learning from Bad Teachers The Neoliberal Agenda for Education in Popular Media

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Abstract

*This paper examines representations of the neoliberal agenda for education in a recent school genre film, *Bad Teacher* (2011) and an episode of *The Simpsons* (2009). I argue that the explicit and implicit messages in these cultural products simultaneously shape, reinforce, and normalize contemporary popular discourses of education. As public pedagogy, Hollywood films are the primary sites where education takes place in contemporary times (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Rather than dismissing these films for their face value messages, I propose we critically analyze them to understand how the neoliberal project is naturalized within films and television shows as capitalist realism. As teacher educators, it is crucial that we critically read these films with our students to identify and counter the subtle messages in films informed by the neoliberal agenda for education.*



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Media coverage of the battles over public education has expanded beyond television news networks and printed media. In recent years, a slew of education documentaries have been released featuring themes ranging from a national spelling bee competition (*Spellbound*, 2002) to an inner city school chess team's national championship trajectory (*Brooklyn Castle*, 2012). Others have dealt with the high dropout rates amongst student of color (*Dropout Nation*, 2012), and the establishment and demise of a successful K-12 Mexican American Studies program (*Precious Knowledge: Arizona's Battle Over Ethnic Studies*, 2011). The neoliberal agenda for education has also been featured in film, specifically in documentaries. The majority of these documentaries have focused on building consent for the neoliberal agenda for education; *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and *The Lottery* (2010) are the most notorious of these documentaries. A considerable amount of critical analysis has been written about these, especially *Waiting for Superman* (see for example Dutro, 2011; Miner, 2011; Swalwell and Apple, 2011). The critique has also paid attention to production of counter-documentaries, such as *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* (2011), released by the Grassroots Education Movement. *Won't Back Down* (2012), a school genre feature film that portrayed parent efforts to turn over a school, was heavily critiqued for its unwavering support for parent trigger laws, which critics argue is a tool of the neoliberal agenda for education. Whether in favor or against the neoliberal agenda for education, one thing is certain, media coverage contributes in shaping the debates over public education policy (Tamir and Davidson, 2011).

The media's coverage of education plays a pivotal role in shaping, reinforcing, and normalizing contemporary discourses of education policy, particularly around school reform and teacher quality, including merit pay and what accounts for teaching and learning. Whereas documentaries are understood as non-fictional cinematic works, and thus informative, feature films are in general considered entertainment. However, as public pedagogy, feature films are the primary sites where education takes place in contemporary times (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Feature films, as popular pedagogy, project a reality that is already in existence, already being lived, rather than an account of what awaits in the future (Fisher, 2009). These films convey the message of capitalist realism, that is, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2). Seemingly innocent films are byproducts of capitalist realism's pervasive atmosphere of conditioning cultural production, regulating "work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (p. 16). Films contribute to normalize capitalist realism. As such, recent school genre films disseminate and normalize the neoliberal agenda for education.

This paper examines representations of school reform and teacher quality in a recent school genre feature film, *Bad Teacher* (2011), and an episode of the animated series *The Simpsons* (2009) titled "How the test was won." Rather than dismissing the romantic comedy as harmful for teachers and the teaching profession (Dalton, 2013), and the animated sitcom as innocent entertainment, I propose we examine how the explicit and implicit messages in these examples work simultaneously to shape, reinforce, and normalize contemporary discourses of education. The film and the animated sitcom normalize the neoliberal agenda for education by building a narrative around discourses of teacher quality and school reform that are presented as the contemporary reality of education. For instance, hidden in the romantic pursuits of a white female teacher in *Bad Teacher* and the struggles of a school principal to regain his position as the leader of the school in *The Simpsons*, the neoliberal agenda for education sets the stage as the

inescapable reality that students, teachers, administrators, and parents encounter in their everyday experiences in the school.

Drawing on what Slavoj Žižek (2006; 2007) calls the paradox of anamorphosis, my critical analysis of these visual texts seeks to uncover the principal arguments of the neoliberal agenda for education as expressed in popular media. Anamorphosis is an artistic technique employed by Renaissance artists to manipulate an image so that when looked directly appears as illegible and distorted but when seen at an angle becomes legible, which Žižek uses to analyze contemporary films. Žižek's paradox of anamorphosis proposes that the narrative in a film's foreground distorts the reality portrayed in a film's background, which may be a reflection of contemporary life. Likewise, peering at the background rather than the foreground narratives in *Bad Teacher* and *The Simpsons* we are able to discern the constructed, imposed, and oppressive reality of the neoliberal agenda for education in the everyday processes of teaching and learning, and in shaping the ideology of contemporary debates on education policy. In what follows, I begin by conceptualizing the paradox of anamorphosis as proposed by Žižek. I then discuss the role of the media in producing ideologies that construct consent for the neoliberal agenda for education as an articulation of capitalist realism. Next, I turn to *Bad Teacher* and provide an analysis of the film that includes a synopsis followed by a discussion of representations of teacher quality and merit pay. Next, I analyze the restructuring of the school day as represented in *The Simpsons* that is preceded by a synopsis of the episode, "How the Test was Won." I argue that it is of crucial importance for teacher educators to critically engage with popular culture concurrently with their students in order to identify *and counter* the hidden and overt messages that seek to build ideological consensus for the neoliberal agenda for education that is projected as a normalized reality in the media, and Žižek's paradox of anamorphosis might serve as a tool for such purpose.

The Paradox of Anamorphosis and Film

The home media release of the dystopian film *Children of Men* (2006) includes "The Possibility of Hope," a short documentary featuring the commentary of scholars such as Slavoj Žižek, Naomi Klein, and Tzvetan Todorov. The scholars comment on themes in the film in relation to contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic realities. Žižek states that *Children of Men*, a science fiction dystopian film, is a realist film in the sense that it makes the viewer perceive reality as an alternate reality. He draws from the perspective system of anamorphosis employed by Renaissance artists to analyze Alfonso Cuarón's film (Bouman, 2013; Žižek, 1999, 2007a). For Žižek, the power of *Children of Men* lies in the background. According to Žižek, it is in the background of Theo's struggles to make sure Kee, the first pregnant woman in the world in over eighteen years and a West African immigrant in England, survives and makes it safe to the Human Project's ship *Tomorrow*, that we see contemporary reality through the paradox of anamorphosis. Žižek conceptualizes the paradox of anamorphosis as, "if you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background" (Žižek, 2007b). Yet, through this distorted and distanced portrayal of contemporary state oppressive measures, such as mass incarceration and torture of prisoners, as an alternative reality, we actually get a glimpse to our reality (Boyle, 2009). The paradox of anamorphosis makes legible what might be blurred and distorted, perhaps by the well-crafted and intended narrative in a film, by viewing and approaching popular media from a different perspective.

For the purpose of this paper, I draw on the paradox of anamorphosis to examine two school genre visual texts, *Bad Teacher* and an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled “How the test was won.” I contend that viewed from the paradox of anamorphosis, the two texts lose their innocence and entertainment purposes by revealing a reality that is foreshadow and distorted by the foreground of a romantic comedy and an animated sitcom. I argue that in these two texts, comedy loses its educative purpose of demonstrating the irrational expectations on teachers in the contemporary context because such comedic elements obscure rather than critique the neoliberal agenda for education by naturalizing the conditions in which education takes place. The comedic elements that carry these texts’ narratives distort the underlying reality purported by the neoliberal agenda for education. This distortion serves to naturalize the neoliberal agenda for education as the reality experienced in contemporary schools, and to shape the ideology of debates on education policy and practice by hiding such reality under the overtly exaggerated and unrealistic expectations placed on the teachers that are bound to elicit a laughter rather than a critique of the conditions that lead to such expectations. The viewer, after having a good laugh, might turn off the TV and simply accept that these are in fact the conditions of contemporary education, and at the end of the day the teachers carry on with their lives within the neoliberal agenda for education as there is no alternative for another sort of education in the horizon. However, when viewed from the anamorphic perspective, the texts not only reveal the realities of neoliberal reforms and ideology but also elucidate possibilities of critique and resistance to this agenda by not simply consuming popular culture as entertainment. Anamorphosis allows us to see that the issues with the neoliberal agenda for education goes beyond unreasonable expectations placed on teachers.

Ideology, Mass Media, and Capitalist Realism

The neoliberal agenda for education is an extension of the neoliberal political project that seeks to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation, and to restore the power of economic elites through processes of dispossession and restructuration of the market, state, and citizenship (Harvey, 2005; Wacquant, 2009, 2012). The neoliberal dispossession and restructuration of social life is conducted on the one hand by a brutal system that disciplines the dispossessed through the penal system, and on the other hand, by the construction of consent in the intermeshing of neoliberal ideology with the practice of everyday life. A discussion on the carceral turn of the neoliberal state is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I will focus on the intermeshing and diffusion of the neoliberal agenda for education in everyday life through popular culture by discussing the role of the media in producing ideologies, and the articulation of capitalist realism in film that essentially, I argue, constructs consent.

In *One-dimensional man*, Marcuse (1964/1968) argues that individuals and all aspects of social life are integrated to the system of production and consumption in advanced industrial societies. According to Marcuse, this absorption is possible primarily through the entertainment and information industry, the desublimation of culture, and changes in industrial management techniques. The creation of false needs give rise to “one-dimensional reality” by changing patterns of behavior and thought that essentially become a way of life. One-dimensional reality presents the world as we know it as the best one there is, and that any ideas, thoughts, and actions that run counter to technological rationality must be eradicated or incorporated as yet another expression of this reality. There is an ideological component in the formation of one-dimensional reality that leads people to accept this reality as the only one. Yet, this is not done

solely through the construction of ideological consensus for technological rationality but rather through the becoming of this ideology into a way of life.

One-dimensional society becomes a way of life through the explicit and implicit teaching of patterns of thought and behavior. This education is primarily imparted by the entertainment and information industries in cultural products such as literature, art, films, and music, which might be rendered as innocent forms of entertainment. Marcuse warns us that, “entertainment and learning are not opposites; entertainment may be the most effective mode of learning” (p. 67). Giroux and Pollock (2010) further contribute to this argument by stating that public pedagogy is the primary site where education takes place in contemporary times. Public pedagogy as a form of permanent education transcends the walls of the classroom and includes a wide range of institutions that produce knowledge and meaning, such as film, television shows, advertisement, video games, and the internet (Giroux, 2005). As public pedagogy, films not only play a role in shaping particular ideologies that seek to mold patterns of thought and behavior into a way of life, they also open pedagogical spaces for critical literacy to identify the ideologies embedded in films and how these reproduce and perhaps challenge existing social and cultural everyday practices (Giroux, 2002). One thing is for certain, in the current context, neoliberal ideology is immersed in the public pedagogy of popular culture.

Ideology is not just a set of beliefs or assumptions but the ways in which social reality is explained. Terry Eagleton (2007) states that, “ideology is no baseless illusion but a solid reality, an active material force which must have at least enough cognitive content to help organize the practical lives of human beings” (p. 26). Ideology is grounded in material reality and organizes the everyday experiences of people. In the context of neoliberalism, consent is constructed in the material grounds of everyday experience (Harvey, 2005), and in the meaning and narratives that explain such experiences. Stuart Hall (1990), in his discussion on the role of the media in articulating, working, transforming, and elaborating ideas about race, further defines ideology as, “those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 89). Ideology provides us with the tools to make sense of our everyday experiences. Furthermore, “ideologies ‘work’ by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to ‘utter’ ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors” (p. 90). In other words, the way we explain reality is based on how we position ourselves within a given ideology. According to Hall, the media construct, “representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (p. 90). The ideologies produced, articulated, and dispersed through the media help us construct our explanations of reality. In the current context, neoliberal ideology is produced, articulated, and dispersed through the media, particularly film and television shows, as *the* reality by which we make sense of our own reality.

The reality portrayed in media, specifically in film, is presented as *capitalist realism*. The concept of capitalist realism was initially developed as the opposite to socialist realism. Socialist realism was not precisely propaganda but an artistic expression that had its own aesthetics. Its main function was to represent the Soviet reality of the day, and to educate the masses in the creation of socialist society (Schudson, 1984/2007; Dobrenko, 2007). In capitalist societies advertisement as an expression of capitalist realism, plays the same role as art and literature did in socialist countries. However, capitalist realism as advertisement functions in, “simplified

social scenes that show the world "as it should be," they picture people as representatives of larger social categories, and they seek an accommodation with whatever is new or newly marketable" (Schudson, p. 216). In this sense, capitalist realism provides a simplified and easy-to-identify reality that does not exist but that might resonate with consumers in capitalist societies.

Contemporary reconceptualizations of capitalist realism go beyond art aesthetics and advertisement. For instance, in her analysis of *The Wire*'s fifth season, La Berge (2010) argues that realism is always about money, and thus, "capitalist realism is the realistic representation of the commodification of realism" (p. 552). Fisher (2009) further explains capitalist realism as, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2). Capitalist realism is more than an art aesthetic opposite to socialist realism, advertisement, or the representations of commodified realism on the screen; it is "a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (p. 16). Capitalist realism encases all areas of social life and essentially naturalizes neoliberal ideology as *the* reality, as *the* way of life. Film and television shows as public pedagogy are not immune to the pervasiveness of capitalist realism. Neoliberal ideology becomes naturalized and pervasive by functioning as the background of the narratives in films and television shows. The neoliberal ideology implicit in capitalist realism thus appears as "obvious elements of the storyline" (Stratton, 2009, p. 13).

This paper is concerned with the narratives in school genre films that present the neoliberal agenda for education as an expression of capitalist realism, that is, as the inescapable reality that we might encounter in any given school in the United States. My argument is that by naturalizing the neoliberal agenda for education as lived reality, its assumptions slowly permeate society and shape and frame the contemporary policy debates and public discourses on public education. Comedy, rather than educate the viewer or provide social critique, actually makes the neoliberal agenda for education more palatable. The naturalization of the neoliberal agenda for education in films is more digestible if it is presented in subtle ways in a similar fashion in what others have called the "hidden curriculum" of school that inculcates the norms, values, and dispositions that reproduce capitalist society (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Anyon, 1980; Apple, 2004). On the one hand, a film like *Won't Back Down* (2012), whose narrative centered on a White working class single mother's struggle to improve the educational prospects of her daughter through the mobilization of neighbors and teachers to turn over a school by harnessing the "parent trigger" legal strategy, was exposed by critics for its uncompromising overt message supporting the neoliberal restructuring of public education. The criticism and backlash to the film's overt support for the neoliberal agenda for education contributed to the film's registering of the worst opening weekend (Sieczkowski, 2012; Strauss, 2012). On the other hand, a romantic comedy like *Bad Teacher*¹ that features a middle school teacher that shows up to school with a hang over, smokes pot in the parking lot, and aspires to marry rich in order to leave the teaching profession, received very little attention from the Left and critical educators. It is in comedies and other seemingly innocent representations that the neoliberal agenda for education is naturalized.

¹ In late April 2014, an original television comedy show adapted from the feature film will begin broadcasting on CBS (Nicholson, 2014; Wieselmann, 2014).

The Neoliberal Agenda for Education in *Bad Teacher* and “How the Test was Won”

The neoliberal agenda for education is present in the background narrative of both the film *Bad Teacher* and the episode of *The Simpsons* “How the Test was Won.” In the following sections I argue that by presenting the restructuring of the public schools as the mere setting of the comedic hyperbole at the foreground, the more complex political reality, which includes opposition and resistance, is distorted and obscured. I bring to surface three key points in the neoliberal reform agenda that are closely bound to each other: teacher quality, merit pay, and what accounts for education (teaching and learning). I also point out the limited instances of futile resistance to the neoliberal restructuring of education as depicted in the texts that serve to obscure any alternative to this reform agenda. Ultimately, I argue, it is in the subtlety of comedy and what at first sight passes as nothing more than entertainment that the neoliberal agenda for education is disseminated and normalized, thus spreading the message of capitalist realism, that is, the sense that the reality portrayed in the films is the only possible one and “that is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher, 2009, p. 2).

“Bad Teachers”: Teacher Quality and Merit Pay

Bad Teacher stars Cameron Diaz as Elizabeth Halsey, a middle school teacher that curses at her students, smokes marijuana on school grounds, shows up to teach with a hangover almost everyday only to spend the day asleep on her desk while the students watch school genre films such as *Stand and Deliver* and *Dangerous Minds*. The movie begins at the end of the school year celebration with the school principal announcing that Elizabeth will be retiring after a one year career as an educator. Her retirement is due to her upcoming marriage to a wealthy man. However, at the beginning of the next school year, Elizabeth returns to her old job as a middle school teacher because the wedding is called off after her fiancé’s mother exposes her as a gold-digger. Elizabeth makes it clear that she is back temporarily at John Adams Middle School (JAMS), a fictitious school located in the suburbs of Cook County, Illinois, until she finds another wealthy man to marry rich. She reveals to her colleagues that she intends to save enough money for a breast implant surgery as her strategy to find a suitable mate. On her first day back on the job, Elizabeth goes out to lunch with Lynn Davies (Phyllis Smith), and over a bucket of fried chicken confesses her reasons for becoming a teacher, “short hours, summers off, and no accountability.” The following day, on the first day of school, Elizabeth meets Scott Delacorte (Justin Timberlake), a young wealthy white male that repeats liberal clichés that end up coming out as racist and sexist commentaries, whom Elizabeth identifies as marriage material. Her quest to start a romantic relationship with Scott pits her against Amy Squirrel (Lucy Punch), a caring and dedicated teacher, and Scott’s love interest. After Elizabeth’s failed attempt to win over Scott due to her inability to save \$9,300 for the breast augmentation surgery, Elizabeth finds out from Lynn that the teacher that gets the highest scores in the state test in the school will get a \$5,700 bonus. The promise of the monetary incentive leads Elizabeth to change her teaching practice from screening teacher genre films to actually teaching content in preparation for the state test. However, when her change in pedagogical approach does not show results in student performance, she decides to go to the testing agency’s office to steal the answer key. Elizabeth successfully does so by impersonating a reporter from The Chicago Tribune that seduces and drugs Carl Halabi (Thomas Lennon), the education researcher in charge of creating the test. Weeks later, when the test results are in, Elizabeth is granted the \$5,700 bonus check. Amy, infuriated, decides to investigate how a “bad teacher” was able to get the highest test scores in the whole district. Her investigation leads her to Halabi who admits to the robbery but eventually

recants her statement after been blackmailed by Elizabeth. Elizabeth is exonerated and Amy, due to her switching desks with Elizabeth to look for evidence of test-tampering while she was gone on a fieldtrip to Springfield, the state capital, is arrested for possession of drugs and alcohol on school grounds. At the end, Amy is relocated to an inner-city school named Malcolm X Middle School as punishment, and Elizabeth returns the following school year to JAMS as a guidance counselor rather than as a teacher.

While the *Bad Teachers* synopsis presented here focuses on instances of the neoliberal agenda for education featured in the film, such as teacher quality, merit pay, and high-stakes testing, it is interesting to note that reviews of the film that appeared in three major national newspapers primarily focused on whether the film featuring a lead female actress playing a vulgar teacher delivered laughs in her romantic escapades (see Dargis, 2011; Hornaday, 2011; Sharkey, 2011). This is in stark comparison to the coverage received by *Won't Back Down*, both in support and in opposition to its overt support for the neoliberal agenda for education (see Goldstein, 2012; Scott, 2012). The coverage both these films received is telling of capitalist realism's pervasive atmosphere of conditioning cultural production (Fisher, 2009) that presents the neoliberal agenda for education as normal elements of the story (Stratton, 2009). In other words, the critique was present and well articulated only when the critics engaged with a film that had an overt message while the distorted and blurred reality on the other film, a romantic comedy, remained unquestioned; the neoliberal agenda for education, although present, was just the obvious and natural element in the *Bad Teacher* storyline background.

It is interesting to note that the setting of *Bad Teacher* is a suburb in Cook County, Illinois. Cook County has the largest population concentration in the state of Illinois, and Chicago is its largest and most populated municipality. The location is significant because Chicago is, "incubator, test case, and model for the neoliberal urban education agenda" (Lipman, 2011). The neoliberal restructuring of Chicago and its public education system reinscribes racial and class segregation, displaces low income and people of color from the city, and sets the grounds for the reconquest of the city by the middle and upper classes (Lipman, 2011a, 2011b; Lipman and Heines, 2007; Smith and Stovall, 2008). Yet, the setting of the film is different than other school genre films, or the focus of empirical studies, in that *Bad Teacher* is set in a tension-free idyllic suburban school with students that are presented as docile and happy to attend school, while the narrative centers on a "bad teacher" and what it is that makes her "bad." The suburban setting of the film serves to normalize the neoliberal agenda for education because here there are no consequences, such as school closures, due to low-test scores. The setting of *Bad Teacher* is a stark contrast to that of school genre films that usually follow the plotline of a teacher's experiences working with low income students of color in an inner city school where violence is the order of the day. The tension-free setting of suburbia in *Bad Teacher* sets the stage for the neoliberal agenda for education to be presented as the normal conditions in contemporary schools. In this sense, the state mandated high-stakes test is presented as just one more thing that the overall happy students do within the contours of contemporary schools.

Many studies suggest that teacher quality is the main in-school factor contributing to student academic achievement, yet it has been difficult to identify teacher traits and characteristics that have a direct positive outcome on student achievement (Goldhaber and Anthony, 2007; Hanushek, 2011). Teacher preparation and certification is one of the characteristics that might contribute to student academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Other possible variables that might contribute to determine the quality of a teacher are the years

of experience in the classroom, and student test scores (Rice, 2003). The neoliberal agenda for education promotes standardized testing as an objective measure of teacher quality (Hursh, 2007). The combination of all these characteristics has given rise to “value-added models” of teacher evaluation with test scores playing a determinant role in what is socially constructed as “quality.” Yet, despite these debates on how to best measure the quality of teachers and the education students receive, there are popular understandings of what constitutes a “good/bad” teacher either through direct experience or from the media. In the next section, I discuss how the quality of teachers and education debate is framed in *Bad Teacher*.

The television spot (Columbia Pictures, 2011) advertising *Bad Teacher* presents a montage of what might be considered “bad teacher” traits. The montage begins in the school gym with the students lined up against the wall and Elizabeth standing in front of them. On one hand she holds a cup of coffee and on the other a dodge ball. Elizabeth asks a question to a male student and when he hesitates to answer, she throws the ball at him hitting him on the face. This clip is followed by Elizabeth’s conversation with Lynn over a bucket of fried chicken in which she states that she entered the teaching profession, “for all the right reasons: shorter hours, summers off, no accountability.” Elizabeth is then shown hosing herself in a sensual pose during the school’s car wash to raise funds for a fieldtrip, cuddling on her desk, and throwing papers and offending her students for their low performance in an assignment. One of her male colleagues, the gym teacher, is shown yelling at an African American male student over who is a better player, LeBron James or Michael Jordan. This thirty-second long television spot presents some of the popular ideas framing the debate over teacher quality and what constitutes a bad teacher: questionable pedagogical practices, undedicated and lazy teachers who entered the profession for their self-interest, and abusive demeanor toward the students.

Elizabeth embodies the quintessential “bad teacher” that would sleep in her classroom while the students continuously watch movies about teachers; she does not meet the public’s image of what constitutes a “good teacher.” Elizabeth is a bad teacher not just because of her erratic behavior but mostly due to her neglect to teach her students and for not even taking the state standardized pre-test seriously. For instance, in a scene in which Elizabeth prepares her students to watch *School Ties* (1992), a movie about a working class Jewish teenager recruited by a prep school to play football, an assistant administrator walks in to deliver the state standardized pre-test, of which Elizabeth had no knowledge about because she had not read the school memo. She gets up and drops the box on one of her students’ desk and proceeds to read the instructions, “According to this memo, I’m supposed to give you guys 45 minutes per section. Bla, bla, bla, bla. Okay. Clear your desks, everybody. Pencils out. Begin.” All the students opened their testing books in unison. The test scores as indicative of teacher quality would deem Elizabeth an ineffective teacher due to her neglect to prepare students for the state tests. The students’ opening of the testing books in unison portrays a reality the majority of students in the United States have encountered at some point in their educational trajectory: the inescapable yearly ritual of sitting quietly for a couple of hours to answer a multiple choice test. After participating in such tests for a number of years, the students know exactly what to do and need very little directions on the testing procedures as depicted in this scene. This comedic segment of the film functions as a representation of a social reality that helps the viewer to interpret his/her own reality and to explain the world based on these representations, like Hall (1990) pointed out on his study on how ideologies work. The film reinforces popular conceptions of what constitutes a bad teacher by exaggerating the actions of a teacher in lieu of what is expected of her in the classroom. The comedic elements of the unreasonable expectations on teachers

represented in the film are portrayed as the reality and as such do not necessarily provide a critique of why these conditions exist.

As antidote to these ineffective teachers, the neoliberal reformers propose introducing a system of incentives to motivate teachers to improve their efficacy and performance. However, the proposals to incentivize teacher quality through merit pay, whether as individuals or as a group, are dependent on test scores (Ravitch, 2010). The idea of incorporating merit pay systems to public schools is an extension of the corporate agenda for education that seeks to run schools as businesses. Yet, initial studies on the impact of merit pay on teacher quality and student outcomes have shown inconclusive results, that is, monetary incentives have not shown improvement in teacher effectiveness and student academic achievement (Sawchuck, 2010; Goodman & Turner, 2011;). In the film *Bad Teacher*, the idea of incentive bonuses is naturalized as it is presented as a normal occurrence, in fact, no one makes a big deal about the monetary bonus. The only one that does get excited about the bonus is Elizabeth given her life plans. The possibility of earning a \$5700 bonus motivates Elizabeth to change her teaching practice; the bonus fulfills its intention in the film for it motivates a “bad teacher” to work relentlessly to make sure all her students achieve proficiency in the state test. This is the reality neoliberal reformers want to see in the schools as part of their restructuring project.

Immediately after finding out about the bonus, Elizabeth is shown standing firmly awaiting for her students to enter her now well-lit classroom. The black board is full with questions, and on each of the students’ desk lays a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as well as an accompanying handout. As she urges her students to settle down, one astounded student asks, “where’s the TV?” but Elizabeth ignores her and proceeds, “Now, everyone, open your *To Kill a Mockingbirds* to page one. Good. Who can tell me why Jem cries when the hole in the tree is filled with cement?” A student replies, “because she is a cry baby,” to which Elizabeth responds by kicking him out of the classroom and states, “We’re here to learn. Anybody else has a problem with that?” The film proceeds with scenes in which Elizabeth is actively engaged with her students reading and analyzing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, including throwing dodge balls at the students for not answering her questions correctly. Despite changing her teaching style, the students do not show progress. It is then that Elizabeth decides to make her foray to the state testing offices to steal the answer key. Of course, at the end, Elizabeth receives the \$5700 bonus for having the highest test scores in Cook County.

What is important to note here in relation to capitalist realism is the naturalization of high stakes testing and merit pay; the test is administered without any objections other than Elizabeth’s comment on the pointlessness of the pre-test, and the monetary bonus is presented as just another component of the teaching profession, as something else that happens on the job. In this sense, two major tenets of the neoliberal agenda for education, high stakes testing and merit pay, are normalized and played in the background of the film’s narrative as the tension-free reality of contemporary schools. Representing the monetary bonus as a regular function of the school serves to construct ideological consensus for the neoliberal proposal of incentivizing teachers for their performance. The ideology of neoliberal reform for education, in this case, works by representing the monetary incentive as a truth that all teachers encounter in the schools, and that it does have an impact in transforming the behaviors of otherwise ineffective bad teacher. This representation of a teacher’s transformation seeks to explain how the teaching profession works. As Hall points out when explaining how ideologies work, the way the

monetary incentive is represented in the film aids in the construction of an ideological truth in support of the neoliberal agenda for education tenet of merit pay.

"ACCACA-DABACCA-ACCACACA": The Restructuring of the School Day

The Simpsons is by now the longest running television show in the United States. The topics covered in the show have been various, often times providing strong critiques of the politics of the day and dominant institutions, such as religion and the school (Alberti, 2004). The show has featured labor strikes (Last Exit to Springfield), the mismanagement of funds by city officials (Marge vs. The Monorail), political corruption (Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington), and immigration debates (Much Apu About Nothing). In the show, Springfield Elementary plays a significant role in the life of the community (Meskill, 2007). It is no surprise that *The Simpsons* would approach the contemporary debates over education. In this section, I begin with a synopsis of the episode followed by an analysis of a montage in the episode that illustrates the restructuring of the school day and the unreasonable expectations exerted on teachers. Throughout, I comment on how the neoliberal agenda for education is blurred in the comedic exploits of the characters.

The episode begins in the kitchen with the parents, Homer and Marge, opening a bottle of champagne to celebrate the beginning of a new school year. Bart, the eldest child and a fourth grader, is not too excited about returning to school. Lisa, the middle child and an overachieving second grader, cannot wait for the school year to begin. Once in school, during the beginning of the year school assembly, Principal Skinner announces that at the end of the month, all students will be taking the Vice President's Assessment Test (VPAT), "part of the federal government's No Child Left Alone Act." As Skinner reminds students of the testing procedure of keeping their eyes on their tests, Superintendent Chalmers interrupts and takes over the microphone. Chalmers then announces that the test scores will determine school funding and for that matter, instruction for the following two weeks will be focused on preparing the students for the test. What follows is one of the most clever and incisive popular media critiques to the neoliberal agenda for education. A montage showing different test preparation strategies points out the reality teachers and students encounter in the weeks leading to the annual administration of the standardized test. What this montage reveals is the irrationality in the rationality (Marcuse, 1964) of the neoliberal restructuring of the school day. Test preparation structures every moment of the school day from choir practice to the alphabet soup served by Lunch Lady Doris to Mrs. Krabappel, the fourth grade teacher, instructing the students in the twelve standardized test basic answer patterns, "Repeat after me: ACCACA-DABACCA-ACCACACA. Number 2: DACACCA-ADADA-BADACAD," and so on with the students reciting after Mrs Krabappel's cue. The gym teacher is shown asking questions from a test preparation booklet and throwing dodge balls at students who do not answer correctly. When confronted by Bart about the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach, the gym teacher replies, "studies show it works."

Two weeks later, on testing day, Bart announces to Lisa that he filled out the answer sheet so as to spell "Slurp my snout." Lisa is vilified for Bart's lack of concern for his academic achievement, however, upon arrival on school grounds, Principal Skinner and Superintendent Chalmers welcome Bart. They reward him, and another group of students, with a helicopter ride to a pizza party in a bowling alley for their stellar scores on the pre-test. It is later revealed that the reward is in fact a ploy to prevent students that might bring down the school's test scores from taking the VPAT; Principal Skinner is included in this group. Even though this is a lie, the

damage has been done as Lisa is unable to concentrate during the test because she believes that Bart actually did better than her on the pre-test. The group of underperformers is disappeared for the day on a joy ride to Capital City. In the meantime, at Springfield Elementary, Superintendent Chalmers administers the test and in trying to motivate the students, he causes further student testing anxiety by telling them to, “imagine each answer is a baby chick. If you answer wrong, the chick dies.” As the test proceeds, Lisa is unable to answer any of the questions for fear of been penalized for guessing. Towards the end of the test, Principal Skinner and the underperforming students arrive on school grounds after a series of events that included losing the school bus, and Ralph, a second grader, falling onto a garbage barge followed by Principal Skinner’s heroic antics to save him. Skinner’s first action back in school is to throw away the tests. Lisa tears her answer sheet into pieces, throws them in the air, and exclaims, “Hooray! I’m a brainy outcast again!” The episode ends with the overturning of the school’s ban on dancing and everyone, including Superintendent Chalmers, dances to the tune of ‘Footloose.’

“How the Test was Won” critiques the restructuring of the school day in response to high-stakes testing. The montage showing different test preparation strategies points out the reality many teachers and students encounter in the weeks leading to the administration of the test. The restructuring of the school day as portrayed in this episode is highly exaggerated, yet it reveals the narrowing of the curriculum and changes in what accounts for teaching and learning in the neoliberal context. The centering of high-stakes testing as the driving force in education narrows the curriculum by shifting the focus of all school activities to follow a prescribed curriculum that limits teachers’ pedagogical agency and harms the educational prospects and well-being of children, particularly children of color and low-income students (Nichols and Berliner, 2008; Crocco and Castigan, 2007; Valenzuela, 2005). The montage on test preparation portrayed in the episode reveals that in every aspect of the school day, from choir practice to gym class to eating alphabet soup during lunch is dedicated to test preparation; test preparation has taken precedence in the school. Although the irrational restructuring of the school day as presented in the episode is ridiculed, it is nonetheless normalized because no alternative to this regime is provided; it is portrayed as a true-to-life representation of contemporary US public schools. Even though the foreground comedic narrative parodies the irrationality of standardized testing, the critique does not go far enough as to provide an alternative or a concise resistance by the teachers to the neoliberal agenda for education.

Mrs. Krabappel’s role in instructing her students on the basic answering patterns in standardized tests reconfigures the notion of what constitutes teaching in the neoliberal era. The teacher in this context is considered a mere technician that efficiently implements the prescribed curriculum of the high stakes test (Sleeter, 2008). Mrs. Krabappel and the other educators passively performed their new role without any sign of resistance thus adding to the background narrative that normalizes the neoliberal agenda as a tension-free reality. Also, the episode dismisses a discussion of what led to the sudden adoption of the standardized test other than Superintendent Chalmers mentioning that the results of the test would determine school funding. Testing scores as determinant of school funding are thus normalized as another matter of fact procedure of the contemporary US public school. Although the foreground narrative parodies the rational irrationality associated with high-stakes test preparation, what is revealed through the paradox of anamorphosis is that this restructuring responds to market mechanisms that seek to “measure, then punish or reward” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 16) for performance on a state mandated test. This hidden rationality of the neoliberal agenda is normalized and obscured as the background stage of a hilarious (yet critically incomplete) satirical plot.

Conclusion

The mass media's coverage of the neoliberal project for education shapes, reinforces, and normalizes contemporary discourses of education. In feature films and television series, the neoliberal agenda is presented as the natural background for the narratives. These backgrounds are often distorted by the narrative in the foreground of the film or show, thus presenting this reality as tension-free and as an idyllic projection of contemporary schools. As public pedagogy, this film and sitcom educate the viewers about their own reality in the schools. As educators we must point out along our students the irrationality of the rational reality projected in the films. By drawing on the paradox of anamorphosis we might be able to clarify neoliberal ideology in popular media by looking at the distorted backgrounds that carry the overt narratives.

As teacher educators we must not refuse and dismiss raunchy comedies, such as *Bad Teacher*, and any form of popular media that does not have an overt message that supports or counters the neoliberal agenda for education. It is too easy gravitate to film documentaries as the only valid cinematographic educational tools, whether from the right or the left. Some featured films, like *Won't Back Down*, are easily examined and analyzed because their message is in the open. We must engage with all forms of popular media as our students, most likely, are the primary consumers of these cultural products. Popular media, as Giroux points out, is today's main educator. We must also remember that the neoliberal agenda for education is just part of a wider political project that seeks to reestablish the conditions of the elites for capital accumulation and dispossession. Neoliberalism is an extension of the global capitalist project of plunder and exploitation. Our analysis of media coverage must be grounded in this understanding. In other words, our analysis needs to be approached from an anti-capitalist framework as we seek, along our students, to imagine coherent alternatives to, in the first instance, the neoliberal agenda for education, while simultaneously envisioning the education for a post-capitalist future.

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