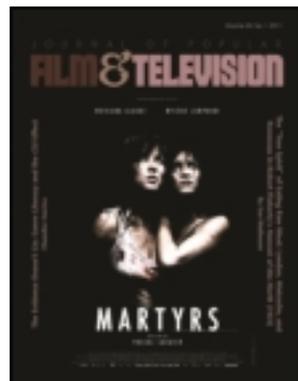


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Bad Teacher Is Bad for Teachers

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Abstract: This article establishes a context for evaluating bad teacher characters and provides a close reading of the 2011 film *Bad Teacher* by focusing on the plot, the depiction of major characters, and aesthetic elements followed by an assessment of the implications of this film for audiences.

Keywords: curriculum, films, Hollywood, popular culture, teachers, teaching

By Mary M. Dalton

Bad Teacher Is

For twenty years, I have studied representations of teachers in popular culture and the implications of those depictions for teachers, students, and those who interact with teachers or students (Dalton, “The Hollywood Curriculum: Who Is the ‘Good’ Teacher?”). By employing categorization schemes to examine how Hollywood casts teachers on film and television, broad patterns have emerged of “good” and “bad” educators, and additional research has revealed that these general archetypes vary in predictable ways according to the sex of the teacher, but that differences in characterization related to race, social class, and sexual orienta-

tion are surprisingly slight, though there are some differences between patterns displayed in Hollywood films and on American television (Dalton, *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies*; Dalton and Linder). Only rarely does a film emerge that challenges preconceptions and expectations. Highlights are revisionist teacher movies like

Election and *Half Nelson* that complicate how audiences see the good teacher character (Dalton, “Revising the Hollywood Curriculum”) and the remarkable film *Elephant*, which presents a school as a collective social space where the point of view of students marginalizes adults, including teachers (Dalton, “The Hollywood View: Protecting the Status

Bad Teacher is altogether different from the films released before it because, in the final analysis, every teacher is revealed to be a bad teacher operating within a corrupt educational system.



Bad Teacher (2011). Directed by Jake Kasdan. Shown from left: Justin Timberlake, Cameron Diaz. Photo courtesy of Claridge Pictures/Photofest. (Color figure available online.)

Bad for Teachers

Quo in Schools Onscreen”). If those are highlights among the hundreds of teacher movies I have seen, one 2011 release presents a high-profile lowlight that is both different and disappointing.

Bad Teacher is not a lowlight solely because the main character is a bad teacher. There have been a number of provocative films in which good teachers cross the proverbial line to do bad things (such as *Election* and *Half Nelson*, mentioned earlier), notable portraits of complex characters deploying their influence unethically with tragic consequences (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*), and softcore films featuring teachers as sex objects (or even a murderous seducer in *Xtra Credit*). There

are also numerous characters in mainstream Hollywood films playing the bad teacher role, usually providing an unyielding, one-dimensional contrast to the good teacher or serving as an unsuccessful foil in a supporting role opposite a more prominently featured good teacher. *Bad Teacher* is altogether different from the films released before it because, in the final analysis, every teacher is revealed to be a bad teacher operating within a corrupt educational system. This article will establish a context for evaluating bad teacher characters and provide a close reading of *Bad Teacher* focusing on the plot of the film, the depiction of major characters, and the aesthetic treatment of the story.

Context

When I started writing about teachers in the movies, there were few voices already engaged in the conversation: Stanley Aronowitz, William Ayers, Rob Edelman, Henry Giroux, and Roger I. Simon. Now, the conversation is much richer. While my own perspective as a scholar has remained basically one of critical media studies employing curriculum theory, feminist theory, queer theory, narrative theory, aesthetic analysis, and other theoretical frameworks as needed to explicate the texts at hand, others have brought more direct applications into play in ways that, I believe, expand the conversation meaningfully.

Some of the most interesting work published in recent years recounts how professors of education use popular culture to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom. Ronald Soetaert, Andre Mottart, Ive Verdoodt, Dierdre Glenn Paul, and James Trier contribute to this strand of discourse. Jacqueline Bach, Robert C. Bulman, and Alan S. Marcus are among the scholars linking cinema to particular disciplines to provide useful analyses and resource guides. Some of the more recent books go beyond the traditional study of educators in cinema to include other popular forms, such as *Education in Popular Culture: Telling Tales on Teachers and Learners* by Roy Fisher, Ann Harris, and Christine Jarvis and *Teacher TV: Sixty Years of Teachers on Television*, which I co-authored with Laura R. Linder. The discussions in these works are vigorous and useful; this is but an overview intended to convey the scope of the conversations taking place, conversations this special issue of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* will surely expand.

The history of feature-length, narrative cinema is not quite one hundred years old at the time of this writing. Yet, movies about teachers date back to the early days of the form, and the iconic good teacher became a staple character during the Hollywood studio era, which had its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s. Starting in its primitive phase with *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939) and developing widely recognized and firmly established conventions in films such as *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *To Sir, With Love* (1967), *Conrack* (1974), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Freedom Writers* (2007),¹ the good teacher movie has become such a mainstay of Hollywood production that cycles of the genre now include a parody, *High School High* (1996), and the revisionist teacher films *Election* (1999) and *Half Nelson* (2006). This completion of the generic cycle suggests that the good teacher movie has reached maturity as a genre because parody and revisionism cannot exist without referencing a basic form that is built around a set of established conventions, all of which requires a consensus about what constitutes those conventions. As part of

The bad teacher in the movies is generally presented as a counterpoint to the good teacher lionized on celluloid or as a potential foil for a band of teenagers.

that established form, a set of common characteristics defines the good teacher in movies; I have termed this the Hollywood Model, and I outlined the traits in *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* (ch. 2). This model constructs the good teacher as an outsider not liked by other teachers, someone involved with students on a personal level, someone who learns from students, someone who personalizes the curriculum to meet everyday needs in students' lives, and someone who experiences conflict with administrators. The Hollywood Model of the good teacher is immediately recognizable to anyone who has watched many American films because of the iconic stature accorded these characters, but much less attention has been paid to the antithesis of the good teacher, such as the outrageous middle school teacher Elizabeth Halsey (Cameron Diaz) in *Bad Teacher*.

The bad teacher is generally presented as neither liked nor disliked (by colleagues) but as part of the system embedded so deeply into the structure of the school as institution that he or she must be accepted or at least tolerated. While good teachers get involved with students and genuinely seem to like them, bad teachers find students boring, are afraid of them, or are eager to dominate them. The good teacher often has an antagonistic relationship with administrators, whereas the bad teacher fits into the administration's plans for controlling students. Finally, as good teachers personalize the curriculum to meet everyday needs in students' lives, bad teachers follow the standardized curriculum, which they adhere to in order to avoid personal contact with students, or they ignore curriculum altogether except for personal gain. One characteristic shared alike by good and bad teach-

ers in the movies is their outsider status, though this characterization says more about the rugged individualism championed in Hollywood film than anything in particular about teacher characters.

In terms of linking an actual theory of curriculum to the movies, I have employed a schema developed by Dwayne Huebner. When Huebner discusses his five value frameworks for curricular thought—technical, political, scientific, aesthetic, and ethical—he argues that none of the five values he proposes exists in a vacuum separate from the other four and that none is inherently good or bad. I have proposed that Hollywood constructs good teachers as those who use some combination of aesthetic–ethical–political values in the sense that Huebner writes of them (Dalton, “The Hollywood Curriculum: Who Is the ‘Good’ Teacher?”; *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies*). The bad teacher in the movies is generally presented as a counterpoint to the good teacher lionized on celluloid or as a potential foil for a band of teenagers. In either scenario, the bad teacher is a supporting player, and in most cases, that teacher exemplifies Huebner's technical or scientific value system. Bad teachers in the movies are also signified by the absence of the aesthetic–ethical–political value frameworks in their teaching. While the latter is true for Elizabeth Halsey in *Bad Teacher*, she departs from the typical depiction of the bad teacher by claiming center stage and reducing all supporting players to her base level.

Although rarely depicted in films, Huebner describes the scientific value framework as “that activity which produces new knowledge with an empirical basis” (225), and bad teachers in the movies have been known to steal students' work or to co-opt students into

working on projects. Of these two value frameworks, the technical and the scientific, almost all the bad teachers in the movies represent the negative side of technical values. Huebner presents the technical value framework as one centered on measurable outcomes. Technical values include an effort toward efficiency and a focus on evaluation with probable moves toward quality control. Huebner maintains that this curricular discourse, which undoubtedly remains the dominant discourse about public education, is both valid and necessary, but it is reductive to take the whole of human knowledge and individual expression and contort the richness of that experience to fit within this very narrow educational model. Bad teachers in the movies place measurable outcomes—high scores on standardized tests or orderly classrooms are the most common—above unselfish interaction with students. While most bad teachers in the movies are presented as caring only about achieving perfect discipline or some vague notion of academic outcome, I cannot recall another like the main character in *Bad Teacher*, a middle school teacher who ignores her students for the first half of the year then snaps into action the second semester when she learns that the teacher whose students receive the highest scores on a standardized test gets a \$5,700 bonus, an amount will make it possible for her to have breast augmentation surgery.

Why should we care about *Bad Teacher*? We care because people are watching and making connections among teacher movies and links between these media texts and their lived experiences. Films like this are aimed at teenagers and young adults and are appealing to tweens precisely because they are marketed as provocative. Even with bad reviews (though some critics admired Diaz's performance), the industry site Box Office Mojo (www.boxoffice.mojo.com) puts theatrical earnings for *Bad Teacher* just over \$100,000,000. The film opened June 24, 2011 on a healthy 3,049 screens in North America, and the DVD has subsequently been released in conjunction with Columbia Pictures on a disc that contains both the unrated and theatrical versions of the

film. For the purposes of this article, I am referring to the theatrical version. Like it or not, people are watching.

Bad Teacher

Plot

The Hollywood curriculum linking these popular films delivers an entertaining narrative that most audiences consume uncritically because the stories offer the drama of a perceived conflict (involving teachers and/or students) and the comfort of a familiar outcome (i.e., order is restored at the end of the film). The tension engages viewers, but the probable outcome is seldom in doubt. This classical narrative structure simplifies complex issues and offers the assurance that every problem has a solution. The structure is reified in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Hollywood writers, directors, and producers have canonized it so that the formula has been replicated for decades. This way of thinking about stories, not to mention thinking about the stock characters (such as good teachers) that populate them, seems to be the major recognizable reality in Hollywood movies, and the boundaries between popular texts and personal ones are informed by the interplay between commercial film and lived experience. *Bad Teacher* tracks the conventional narrative construct Syd Field adapted from traditional Aristotelian structure, a construct that dominates Hollywood cinema.

Particularly interesting elements of the plot of *Bad Teacher* are the key events situated as plot points leading

into the second and third acts of the film and the events constituting the midpoint of the film. Despite the fact that the film is promoted with an iconic image of the main character, Elizabeth Halsey, in the classroom either passed out or sleeping at her desk, most of the plot is driven by her personal desires. *Bad Teacher* certainly is not a film about learning unless we posit that there is a hidden curriculum suggesting that all teachers are bad and the system is corrupt—not the lesson we hope for in popular films. That is, however, essentially the subtext folded into a film about one woman's quest for a bonus that ends, not unexpectedly, in a relationship with a gym teacher she spurns throughout most of the movie, a character named Russell Gettis (Jason Segel). In almost all teacher films, women teachers are not allowed to express their sexuality without being punished, a standard that is not applied to male teachers in the movies, who often have wives, girlfriends, same-sex partners, or other love interests. This is a remarkable pattern that persists across time, a double standard that I have traced to the lived experience of actual teachers and explained with the application of feminist theory and psychoanalytic theory (*The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies*, ch. 5). It is curious that the film *Bad Teacher* features an dislikeable teacher who manipulates and deceives men throughout the film yet ends up with a man who accepts, and even adores, her while knowing her flaws. While it is refreshing to see a double standard shattered, Elizabeth Halsey manages to bring everyone down to her level by the end of the film, which makes this story something of a Pyrrhic victory.

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Bad Teacher (2011). Directed by Jake Kasdan. Shown from left: Unidentified, Cameron Diaz. Photo courtesy of Claridge Pictures/Photofest. (Color figure available online.)

The film begins at the end of an academic year with Elizabeth leaving the job she's held for one year while planning her wedding to a wealthy man, continues through the following year as she schemes to get money for breast implants to attract Scott Delacorte (Justin Timberlake), and ends with her returning for a third year at the school after being promoted to guidance counselor. There are many scenes of Elizabeth in the classroom during the fall semester during which she shows movies to the students while she sleeps at her desk either nursing a hangover from the previous night or getting drunk or high from the stash hidden under a false bottom in her lower desk drawer. She begins showing old copies of teacher films the very first day of class. Notably, three of the four films she screens in class are biopics shown in this order—*Stand and Deliver*, *Lean on Me*, and *Dangerous Minds*. When Principal Wally Snur (John Michael Higgins) asks her about showing movies in class (presumably Amy [Lucy Punch] has revealed this), Elizabeth wears a sweet expression and

offers a ready reply: "Some clips maybe. But, you know, in a lot of ways, I think that movies are the new books." As the weeks pass, movies continue to roll with less and less attention to content.²

The plot of *Bad Teacher* centers on Elizabeth's quest to get breast implants to attract Scott, and her first effort to raise money for the procedure involves displacing Amy as supervisor of the student car wash to raise funds for the spring field trip to the state capitol so Elizabeth can embezzle money to put in the fishbowl she has labeled "New Tits." The major turning point at the end of the first act takes place at the Christmas dance, when Scott reveals to Elizabeth he is "crushing" on Amy, and an angry Elizabeth subsequently gets high in the gym with Russell but still sees him as inadequate. The major storyline in the film is clearly the personal status of the four main characters—Elizabeth, Russell, Amy, and Scott. At the midpoint of the film, the four of them are at a country music bar, the Cowboy Palace Saloon, where the teacher band Fifth Period performs. Elizabeth sits at

a table with Russell, where they banter and drink beer while Amy gyrates on the dance floor in front of the band. Russell asks Elizabeth out, as he has since the first day of school, and she rejects him once again, which doesn't put him off in the least. Scott sings "Simpatico," his first original composition, a song that reveals his feelings for Amy in front of their coworkers, which makes Elizabeth livid. Only on the ride home, when another colleague mentions that there is a \$5,700 state bonus for the teacher whose students get the highest scores on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test, does Elizabeth pull herself together, determined to get that money for her breast implants and to outperform the teacher who wins every year—Amy.

The second half of the film shows a markedly different teacher in the classroom. Her desire to win the competition pushes Elizabeth to actually teach, but there is too much ground to make up and too little time to get there, so she seduces and drugs an official to secure a copy of the test. When the results of the test are announced, John Adams

Middle School places in the top five percent of the entire state, and Principal Snur announces, "I want to single out one of our own who shows that with hard work and dedication, one teacher can make a difference." Russell and Amy are both skeptical when the principal announces that Elizabeth's students have earned the highest scores in Cook County, but Elizabeth smiles calmly at the announcement, takes the bonus check, and snaps into action. She puts an apple on Amy's desk that has been tainted with poison ivy to keep her from chaperoning the field trip to Springfield with Scott. Elizabeth fills in on the trip, which launches a sequence of events leading to the resolution of the film. Going into the third act, Elizabeth engages in one of the most uncomfortable sex scenes in teacher movie history when she "dry humps" Scott and figures out how to leave aural evidence of the encounter on Amy's mobile phone. It's a frustrating encounter that reveals some of Scott's quirks, and when Elizabeth runs into Russell in the hallway as she emerges from Scott's hotel room, he is the one who rebuffs her without missing a beat.

This crossing of lines, Elizabeth making out with Scott, Amy getting even with Elizabeth by switching desks to learn her secrets, and Russell deciding to stop his pursuit of Elizabeth, sets events in motion for the resolution of the film. At this point, the good teacher has descended to the level of the bad teacher, which renders the distinction meaningless. Amy absolves Scott of blame in the encounter, a version of events he meekly accepts, charges that Elizabeth cheated on the test, and reveals that the bad teacher is using drugs. Amy, whose mental instability has been hinted at previously in the film, goes on a rampage. Ultimately, Elizabeth gets out of the test tampering charge by blackmailing the official who gave her the test, and she gets out of the drug charge by implicating Amy. The principal and superintendent supervising the proceedings are either too dense to figure out what is going on or too afraid of bad publicity to give in to the truth. At any rate, Amy is reassigned to one of the worst schools in the

state and says goodbye to her colleagues at the final faculty meeting of the year, immediately after which Scott suggests that he and Elizabeth can "start over." This time, Elizabeth brushes Scott off, having decided that Russell may be a better fit for her. When she goes to the gym to find Russell, he begs her to find another job, any other job, but Elizabeth says teaching is the only thing she is good at, which should make viewers grimace. They banter, kiss, and leave together. When they return to school the next fall as a couple, Russell remains a gym teacher, and Elizabeth has been promoted to guidance counselor.

The plot follows a conventional structure that establishes the love story as the primary storyline, though it intersects the teaching storyline with Elizabeth's quest for money from the car wash and the state bonus. There are a series of setups and payoffs and a number of reversals along the way. The linear narrative is organized according to convention and plays against some of the rules of good teacher movie (a feat accomplished with more diligence if not success in the parody *High School High*), but the ending does not ring true. Since we have never seen Russell engaged in teaching and his laziness is implied rather than presented explicitly, it is not clear whether he is good, bad, or simply falls into the shadow of all physical education teachers in movies (Dalton, *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* 77–80). Similarly, Scott is never shown teaching but is presented as a rich milquetoast with more than a few kinks hiding beneath his preppy/nerdy exterior. It is Elizabeth, Amy, and Principal Snur we have seen most clearly as educators throughout the film. Although Amy has been effective by

objective measures (without cheating), she is presented as mentally unstable and unethical. There is no evidence that Elizabeth is an effective teacher even when she begins to try in the classroom, because she cheats for her students to get good test scores. And Principal Snur is easily misled by Elizabeth's manipulation. All of this leads us to the end of the film. Clearly, viewers are supposed to think that Elizabeth has mellowed or, even more difficult to believe, that she always harbored good intentions deep inside. There is no evidence to support this other than that she finally gets together with Russell, decides to forego the breast implants, and suggests splitting the check with a timid co-worker who treated Elizabeth to lunch the year before. This second ending of the film (the new school year) feels tacked on and false. Better to have ended with Elizabeth leaving the gym with Russell and giving viewers a more fluid ending with regard to her professional life.

Character

From the beginning, viewers are encouraged to see Elizabeth as the bad teacher and Amy as the good teacher, though by the end of the second act, the line between categories has begun to blur. Because these are the teachers who represent the two poles, and because they are the two most often depicted in the classroom, Elizabeth and Amy will be the characters specifically considered here. It is unusual among teacher films to see the bad teacher presented as the protagonist (established by Aristotle as a heroic but flawed character) and even more unusual for the good teacher to play the role of antagonist, but this structure makes it easier to level the

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playing field and make the point that there really are no good teachers at John Adams Middle School, often referred to as JAMS.

As noted previously, the Hollywood Model constructs the good teacher as an outsider who is not liked by other teachers, someone involved with students on a personal level, someone who learns from students, someone who personalizes the curriculum to meet everyday needs in students' lives, and someone who experiences conflict with administrators. From the outset of the film, Amy's positioning as the good teacher is suspect according to some of these measures. The only teachers she interacts with in significant ways onscreen are Scott, who becomes her boyfriend, and Elizabeth, who becomes her nemesis. Aside from these two characters and Principal Snur, Amy does not interact enough with other characters to determine whether or not she is liked. There is one tongue-in-cheek reference to learning from students. Just before students return to school, Elizabeth comes to Amy's classroom door and surveys the immaculate, brightly decorated room, noting that there is an apple on each student's desk before picking one up and biting into it. "I thought the teachers were supposed to get the apples," says Elizabeth (setting up the scene later in the film when she will place a tainted apple on Amy's desk). Notably, Amy Squirrel's red hair is bound up in a ponytail that is styled to look like the bushy tail of a squirrel. Amy replies, "Well, I think the students teach me at least as much as I teach them. That's just something I say sometimes." There is a beat between the two lines, and Amy delivers the second line with uncertainty, which makes the first statement a reference to what is expected of good teachers while the second statement reveals it to be an untruth. Amy tries to personalize the curriculum the first day of class

by dressing like a tour guide and talking to students through a megaphone about how "cruising through eighth grade social studies" is "going to be a crazy ride," but it is clear from cutaway shots of students that they are shocked rather than engaged. One element of the Hollywood Model that does hold true for Amy is her continued conflict with Principal Snur over Elizabeth, reporting her for embezzling, drug use, test fraud, and other infractions that are true but unproven.

If she does not perfectly fit the Hollywood Model of the good teacher, then who is Amy? She is an imperfect facsimile designed to evoke the impression we have of a good teacher—maintains a perfect classroom, places desks in groups rather than rows, possesses a perky demeanor, supervises extracurricular activities—but failing to possess the most important characteristics of good teachers on the screen. Amy does not make authentic connections with students and transform their lives. Amy's character, by necessity, must be less likeable than the protagonist—the promiscuous, gold-digging, potty-mouthed, self-absorbed Elizabeth. How to achieve this? That is the dilemma. What do viewers like less than a bad teacher? Amy is a hypocrite.

As for Elizabeth, she reveals her character time and time again. Recall that the bad teacher character is usually a part of the landscape rather than someone overtly liked or disliked by his or her peers. This is the case for Elizabeth, too, in *Bad Teacher*. Also, bad teachers find students boring, are afraid of them, or are eager to dominate them. For Elizabeth, students are nonentities, and she never learns their names, even in the second half of the film after she tries to cram facts into their heads before the test. She cares nothing about her students and whether or not they learn; she cares only for herself and

earning the \$5,700 bonus to pay for her surgery. In keeping with a characteristic of all teachers who play leading roles, whether good or bad or somewhere in between, Elizabeth maintains her outsider status. She is situated as an outsider through her own actions: smoking pot in her car, drinking in class, hooking up with Chicago Bulls to try to get pregnant, stealing money from the car wash fundraiser, cheating on the standardized test, stealing a figurine from a student's house to give to the principal, making cruel remarks to every character she does not need, and lying whenever it suits her purpose. There is no level too low for Elizabeth to go if it suits her needs. At the end of the film, when Scott tries to strike up a relationship with her, she does not rebuff him because not doing so would be dishonest but walks away because her wants have changed.

Aesthetics

The film opens with the 1980 song "Teacher Teacher" by Rockpile underneath a montage of found footage of teachers and students across time periods and cultures. Some of the images convey an idyllic view of the classroom with lots of instruction, apples for the teacher, and students raising their hands enthusiastically, but there are also some strange concoctions in the lunchroom, a shot of the Three Stooges, and an animated clip. The opening is a visual hodgepodge, and the song itself strikes an ironic note. The music sounds like a bright pop tune, but the lyrics describe a student in love with the teacher and eager for instruction on matters far outside the approved curriculum. Even though she has a bad disposition and lack of interest in them, it is certain that many of the male students at JAMS (and their fathers, gym teacher Russell, and one teacher who, it is implied, is a lesbian) have carnal thoughts about Elizabeth Halsey. Despite the dissonance created by the conflicting images, which dissolve from period footage into a shot of students spilling out of the front doors of JAMS on the last day of school, and the difference in tone between the pop sound of the opening song and its message, the overall mood established from

From the first scenes of the film, a clear distinction is drawn between Amy and Elizabeth by their cars, living spaces, and classrooms.

the outset is light, bright, and airy. That will soon change; after all, the film has been termed a black comedy.

From the first scenes of the film, a clear distinction is drawn between Amy and Elizabeth by their cars, living spaces, and classrooms. When Elizabeth leaves the school following her first year of teaching, she plans to marry her wealthy fiancé and never return to work. She leaves the faculty meeting, climbs into her red Mercedes sports coupe, and tears out of the parking lot in reverse while smoking a cigarette and nearly plowing into a school bus. The Illinois license plate on the back of her car, flanked by hearts, reads “HERS.” Not for long. When Elizabeth’s fiancé realizes she is a gold-digger, he dumps her, and she returns to work three months later driving a compact car that looks like a clunker. It is red and sports the same tag, but everything else is different this time around for Elizabeth. From her fiancé’s palatial home, she has moved into a dumpy little apartment shared with a man she met on Craigslist. The small rooms are beige, impersonal, and appear slightly unkempt. Elizabeth seems to have little regard for her apartment or for her classroom, viewing both of them as way stations before she lands a rich man to provide for her. Her classroom is too Spartan to be unkempt. The chairs are in rows facing the blackboard and the teacher’s desk, where Elizabeth generally sleeps while the students watch movies on the television mounted on a rolling cart.

In contrast, Amy’s classroom has students grouped in workstations around the brightly decorated room. In the fall, there are autumn leaves on the bulletin boards and tones of yellow, orange, and red throughout the room. During the spring term, pastel colors decorate the boards. The room is vibrant and well organized. We see less of Amy’s living space and, without an establishing shot, do not know if she lives in an apartment or a house, but the interior is comfortable and homey. She has a pet turtle, a healthy plant by the sofa, and the dominant colors are a cheerful yellow and chocolate brown. From a quick shot of her car when she drives up to JAMS to confront Elizabeth after the school field trip, we

The bad teacher is the main character.
The good teacher is not very likeable.

can tell that Amy drives a nondescript, blue-green station wagon, which evokes a nostalgic sense of family.

The contrast between the two characters in terms of costuming and makeup is equally stark. In the scene near the beginning of the film when Elizabeth goes to the final faculty gathering, she is wearing a demure yellow dress and sipping champagne as colleagues she seems to hardly know wish her well with her upcoming wedding and present her with a gift certificate for \$37 to Boston Market. She seems a little distant, perhaps, but nothing like the bad teacher she will become the following year when forced to return to teaching for the paycheck. Most of time, Elizabeth’s hair is flowing wild, her makeup is harsh around the eyes and mouth, and her clothing is tight and suggestive. She wears mostly black and red, sometimes accented with gray or white, and usually sports extremely high heels that accentuate her height and long legs. When she wears red, it is usually in an attempt to inflame the passions of those around her, and her lipstick is dark red until the end of the film. Not only is her wardrobe overtly sexy, but Elizabeth often crosses the line into what might be termed “trashy” attire, which reinforces her status as an outsider. It is worth noting that while under investigation by the principal and superintendent over Amy’s allegations, Elizabeth dons black glasses and pulls her hair back, though the black dress she wears is formfitting. In the final scene of the second school year, Elizabeth is wearing looser clothing, dark slacks, a white blouse, and a gray sweater. Her lipstick is a pale pink. As stated before, this is the natural end of the movie. In the actual final scene of the film, the lipstick is still pale, but Elizabeth is wearing an incredibly short, tight dress. She is carrying an assortment of cacti in a terracotta pot, ostensibly for her new desk. The ending may not work, but the plants in the pot seem fitting for her personality.

Amy is her antithesis. Amy has a more natural look than Elizabeth. Her makeup is muted. Her hair, though usually worn down after the opening scene’s ponytail, is more subdued than Elizabeth’s blonde mane. The biggest difference between the two is their clothing, however. Amy is costumed in looser-fitting outfits, usually pants and tops in earth tones and pastels incorporated into printed patterns. There is nothing suggestive or provocative about Amy’s costuming, with the exception of the scene at the Cowboy Palace Saloon where the Fifth Period plays. At first, she is wearing jeans, a leather jacket, and a knit shirt beneath. When Amy takes off the jacket, it turns out she is wearing a tight-fitting tank top. After Scott sings “Simpatico” and Elizabeth becomes angry about the situation, the camera focuses on Amy’s generous cleavage bouncing up and down in slow motion from a perspective approximating Elizabeth’s point of view. Amy, who clearly wins this round of their competition, is wearing neither an earth tone nor a pastel as usual but a rich purple color, a tone associated with royalty.

Finally, it is important to look at the position of the camera to tell another layer of the story. Throughout the film, Elizabeth is shot from an angle slightly lower than eye level, which gives her an implicit authority and also conveys power dynamics among the central characters. Three scenes in particular illustrate the point. First, consider the scene in Amy’s office when Elizabeth takes an apple. Amy sprawls across one of the desks as Elizabeth stands opposite looking down at her. Amy says, “Look, I know you kind of skated by last year doing the bare minimum thing, but I just wanna say, now you’re back, I just know you are going to get your teachin’ on.” Amy is making a cutting remark about Elizabeth, the bad teacher, but visually Elizabeth is the more powerful figure as she looks down (literally and figuratively) on the good teacher. The first

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school day after Elizabeth has learned about the state bonus for the highest test score, there are big changes in her classroom. The scene opens with a wide shot of Elizabeth standing in front of her desk in the empty classroom waiting for the students. She wears a pencil slim beige skirt and red top and is photographed from lower angle than usual, making her seem even taller. As the students enter, she sits on the desk, and one student asks, “Where is the TV?” It’s a logical question, but the visual cues—including the fact that there are questions related to the curriculum written on the board—should have given the students pause. When one boy cracks a joke, Elizabeth kicks him out and informs the students, “We’re here to learn.” This is the first time Elizabeth has thought about student learning, and it is happening because of her self-interest. The only character in the film that shares Elizabeth’s social space within the frame as an equal is Russell. In their scenes together, and in his scenes with other characters, Russell is also consistently photographed from an angle lower than eye level, a visual cue that Russell and Elizabeth are linked from the very beginning of the film.

While most of the aesthetic elements of the film reinforce major ideas and themes, some of these elements conflict with them. That is not unexpected, because popular films are rich texts filled with competing messages—even when some ideologies are dominant in particular movies or in genres of films—and that conflict is part of what drives the drama of Hollywood narratives. From the outset, *Bad Teacher* breaks some of the established rules, but its conflicts are not so much internal to the film as external with films in the genre. The bad teacher is the main character. The good

teacher is not very likeable. The bad teacher is photographed in such a way that she is trashy-looking but powerful. The good teacher turns out to be at least as deeply flawed as the bad teacher, and she ends up taking the blame for some of the most egregious rule-breaking perpetuated by the bad teacher. No one operates from a position of moral authority. None of this makes sense in the schema of conventional good teacher movies, but the competing messages do lay a foundation for a film in which the central premise is that there are no good teachers—the dominant ideology of *Bad Teacher*—despite the fact that viewers are encouraged to root for Elizabeth Halsey and to feel positive about her romance and promotion.

Implications

Why is the film bad for teachers and others? Most obviously, the film is bad for viewers because of the overarching message that there are no good teachers and that the educational system is corrupt at every level. There are also implications regarding our understanding of race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. Elizabeth utters two ethnic slurs in the film with impunity. There is very little racial diversity in the classroom, and the one African American student who is given a name and lines of dialogue, Shawn (Adrian Kali Turner), is depicted at the Christmas dance arguing with Russell about whether LeBron James is a better basketball player than Michael Jordan. When Amy announces that she is leaving JAMS to go to one of the worst schools in the state, she says, “And, boy, I am looking forward to bringing my brand of zany energy to

those underprivileged students at Malcolm X High School.” There is also a reductive exploration of gender, particularly among women characters, with women falling into the dichotomy of “good girls” and “bad girls” based on their sexual behavior. Elizabeth and Amy represent this most broadly, but it is suggested that these are universal types that are replicated in the younger set and represented among students by Chase Rubin-Rossi (Kathryn Newton) and Sasha Abernathy (Kaitlyn Dever). There is also the implication, presented in unflattering ways, that a teacher named Ms. Pavicic (Jillian Armenante) is a lesbian. Finally, it is clear that most of the students at the school are from upper-middle-class families while most of the teachers, especially Elizabeth and Russell, are having a much harder time making ends meet. The parents seem to care less about what the children are learning than about the grades and test scores they receive, and many of them are willing to pay Elizabeth “for supplies” to make sure their children get the grades their parents want. This type of narrow and negative stereotyping in a widely seen film like *Bad Teacher* is destructive and frames expectations of viewers who see the same patterns repeated onscreen in other films, even in a supposedly “serious” recent film like *Won’t Back Down* (2012), intended to impugn teachers with tenure and undermine unions representing teachers. The implications of film depictions affect teachers, students, parents, and policymakers. I think idealized “good” teachers, who are simultaneously heroic and ineffective, cause viewers to dichotomize real teachers into camps of “good” and “bad” in ways that are not only reductive but that also foster a lack of trust in teachers, their training, and their professionalism. When all the educators are bad, as in *Bad Teacher*, the effect is amplified. This film may have been marketed as provocative and as a challenge to the status quo, but there is nothing radical about this bad movie even though it could have unintended consequences by inadvertently reinforcing actual educational policies that focus on accountability and outcomes measured solely by standardized testing. In-

stead of wasting time with *Bad Teacher*, either open it up to critique or seek bolder visions. Find films and other texts with radical teachers who use the Hollywood Model as a springboard for political action that at least nudges at the status quo.³ Teachers who fit the Hollywood Model may be not mount serious challenges to the status quo on screen, but in real schools, teachers like these might disrupt the efficiency of the system. It is no accident that current educational policies and practices limit the power of individual teachers and students, and it is no help that films like *Bad Teacher* diminish respect for the profession and distract people who view it from more serious and potentially transforming ideas.

NOTES

1. The genre continues with films like *Here Comes the Boom* (2012), in which a teacher starts competing in mixed martial arts contests to earn money to save the school music program. The teacher in charge of the music program is played by Henry Winkler (see note below).

2. The final film clip shown onscreen in the classroom after winter break is the scene from the slasher movie parody *Scream* (1996) in which Principal Arthur Himbry (an uncredited Henry Winkler) is murdered by the masked killer.

3. Advocating change without the transparent political agenda of *Won't Back Down* (2012). Any narrative that advocates the broad transfer of public funds to support private enterprises (without an improvement in assessment results) should be carefully examined and critiqued.

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