

Half Nelson and Dialectics

James Trier

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

For years, I have been writing about what I call “school films,” which I define as films that are in some way, even incidentally, about a teacher or a student. Most of the films that comprise the school film genre are set in the suburbs (or sometimes in small towns) and feature middle and upper middle class White students as the main characters. In these films, teachers are typically very minor characters (usually comical figures), if any teachers appear at all. As I have explained elsewhere (Trier, 2001), these suburban school films are very diverse in terms of genre, ranging from light-hearted romances (*Pretty in Pink*), fluff comedies (*Clueless*), Pygmalion stories (*She’s All That*), cult classics (*I Was a Teenage Werewolf*), celebratory youth-rebellion movies (*Pump Up the Volume*, *Dazed and Confused*), supernatural thrillers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Carrie*), sci-fi tales (*Disturbing Behavior*, *The Faculty*), dark-humor comedies (*Heathers*, *Pretty Persuasion*), spoofs (*High School*, *Not Another Teenage Movie*), and a few serious accounts of violence committed in schools (*Elephant*).

The other main subgenre of school films, comprised of far fewer films than the suburban school film subgenre, features an educator in the main role. Though a few films have been made about principals—the most popular of which is *Lean on Me*—most of these films are about teachers. And among these films, most are about teachers who work in inner city schools (blockbuster exceptions are *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and *Dead Poets Society*, which take place, respectively, in a suburban high school and a private school catering to White students from wealthy families). The classics of this subgenre of inner city school films about

teachers are *Blackboard Jungle*; *To Sir, with Love*; and *Up the Down Staircase*. Blockbusters from the 1980s and 1990s include *Stand and Deliver* and *Dangerous Minds*. And the most recent popular addition to this subgenre is *Freedom Writers*.

All of these inner city films that feature a teacher or a principal as the main character are serious dramas in which the educators struggle to save their inner city minority students from the dangers and dead-ends of their lives (for a deeper analysis of this kind of school film, see Trier, 2005). And in these films, the educators always succeed, which has caused such films to be referred to as “teacher savior” films by academics who have written about such films (e.g., Ayers, 1994; Dalton, 1999; Edelman, 1990; Farber & Holm, 1994; and Paul, 2001).

In this article, I will discuss the independent film *Half Nelson* (2006). Specifically, I will analyze the film’s representation of the teacher in terms of two main clichés of the “teacher savior” film. First, I will explore the way *Half Nelson* radically departs from the cliché of the *ahistorical* cinematic educators who appear in the teacher savior genre. Then, I turn my discussion to the other main cliché that the film partially subverts, which is that *Half Nelson* does not offer a one-dimensional representation of an educator who is an unquestionable figure of moral authority, which is the case in all such “teacher savior” films.

It is essential to state at the outset that I have conceptualized this article to be one that can be taken up as an *introductory* text that might initiate a pedagogical project designed to engage readers¹ either in developing a deeper analysis of *Half Nelson* itself, or in analyzing *Half Nelson* in relation to other teacher savior films. The main effect of this decision is that I have necessarily avoided including “spoilers” (i.e., plot and character elements that, if divulged, would spoil the viewing pleasure for someone who has not seen a film), which means I have left much to be explored in the film.² However, in my conclusion, I suggest some potential discussion topics that are designed to focus attention on plot and character elements that I necessarily have not explored in my analysis.

It is also essential to articulate the theory of “reading” (interpretation) that shapes my discussions of the films. I am taking up Stuart Hall’s (1980) theory of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Hall’s theory posits that popular culture texts (and most other texts) are encoded to bring about certain meanings and simultaneously to close off other meanings through the text’s presences and absences (or silences). An arguably simple explanation of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings goes like this: A preferred reading is one that sees (interprets, understands) a text as the text sees itself and as the text wants to be seen. A negotiated reading is one that recognizes

contradictory elements in a text, that does not accept all the elements that fit a preferred reading, that might read some elements in an oppositional way, but that does not read in a totally oppositional way. An oppositional reading is one that rejects most or all of what a preferred reading accepts, resulting in a reading that can indeed “read the signs” but refuses to follow their direction.

As will be seen, whereas I enact an oppositional reading of an important scene from the film *Lean on Me*, I engage in preferred readings of selected scenes from *Half Nelson* in order to develop my argument that *Half Nelson* subverts two main clichés of the teacher hero school film. However, I recognize how those elements that I necessarily do not explore have the potential to generate negotiated and oppositional readings about certain important aspects of the film. My recognition of this is embedded in the discussion questions and topics that appear in the conclusion, which are likely to engage readers in activating an array of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings of various scenes, or of the totality of the film itself.

The Song Remains the Same (Or Does It?)

Half Nelson (2006) is a film about a popular, young, White teacher named Dan Dunne, who has been teaching eighth-grade history for at least six years at a junior high in Brooklyn, New York. Dan is also the coach of the girl’s basketball team. Dan has a passion for teaching and he cares deeply about his students (most of whom are African Americans), and he forms a special relationship with one of his students, a thirteen-year-old girl named Drey (short for Audrey). Drey lives with her mother, an overworked paramedic who is often assigned double-shifts that force her to work even longer hours than her usually long shifts, so Drey is essentially a latch-key kid who heats up her dinner in the microwave and watches TV alone until her mother comes home (sometimes very late, with Drey asleep on the couch, the TV still on). Drey’s father lives somewhere in the city but he never comes around. He doesn’t appear in the film, though Drey’s mother chastises him over the phone (as Drey overhears) for never picking Drey up from school or being a part of her life. Drey’s brother, Mike, is in jail for selling drugs for a neighborhood drug dealer named Frank. Because Mike did not give up Frank to the police, Frank (young, handsome, and charismatic) provides Drey and Mike’s mother with money now and then to help out the family economically (the money always passes from Frank to Drey when they cross paths in the neighborhood). Frank, though, also has designs on Drey, hoping to lure her into becoming a drug deliverer and

eventually a dealer, like her brother. Though Drey can certainly see some of the dangers and consequences inherent in going down such a path, she is still just thirteen, so she needs someone who can look out for her. Unfortunately, Drey's mother isn't fully aware of how often Frank and Drey see one another, nor is she aware of Frank's growing influence over Drey. Drey's teacher, Dan Dunne, however, eventually does become aware of the danger that Frank poses for Drey, and one main storyline of *Half Nelson* is Dan's struggle to prevent Drey from coming fully under Frank's seductive influence.

If this summary encapsulated all that *Half Nelson* is, then the film would seem like yet another "savior" film about an educator who enters an inner city school with the intent of saving minority students from lives endangered by the poverty that structures their everyday experiences, the violence that surrounds them where they live, and few possibilities of escaping from their dead-end futures. *Half Nelson*, however, radically departs from the basic clichés of the "savior" school film in two important ways.

Banishing History

One of the main clichés of the educator "savior" film has to do with politics. More specifically, this cliché concerns the politics of the educators in these films. My argument is that Dan Dunne's "left" political orientation stands in contrast to the political orientations of the educators in any other teacher film. To set up my argument, I will first analyze the political message that is encoded in one of the blockbusters of the educator savior film subgenre, *Lean on Me*.

Lean on Me (1989) is a fictionalized (yet close to the facts) account of the experiences of Joe Clark, an African American principal of Eastside High, an urban school in Patterson, New Jersey, from 1983-1991. The film depicts Clark's "tough love," authoritarian methods for dealing with the many serious problems that Eastside High School faced. By the end, the film's preferred message is clear: because of Clark's draconian policies and methods, he turned Eastside High around, and Clark is a heroic educational figure.

On my own admittedly oppositional reading of the film text, the most ideologically problematic message of the film crystallizes in one specific scene. Clark is on the stage of the school's assembly hall, and behind him are dozens of students, most of whom are African American. In the audience are hundreds more students, nearly all African Americans. Clark holds a microphone and faces the students seated in the hall, explaining that the students on stage are drug dealers and users, and that because

they “are incorrigible,” they are being “expurgated . . . forever” from the school. At this point, what seems to be two dozen plainclothes security officers (all African American men) swiftly remove all the students by physical force from the stage. Moments later, Joe Clark is alone on stage. When the verbal commotion among the seated students dies down, Clark addresses them with a warning and a declaration:

Next time, it may be you. If you do no better than they did, next time it *will* be you. They said this school was dead, like the cemetery it’s built on. But we call our Eastside teams “ghosts,” don’t we? And what are ghosts? Ghosts are spirits that *rise* from the dead. *I* want you to be *my* ghosts. You are going to *lead* our resurrection by denying expectations that all of us are *doomed* to failure. *My* motto is simple. If you do not *succeed* in life, I don’t want you to *blame* your parents! I don’t want you to *blame* the *White* man! *I want you to blame yourselves!* The responsibility is *yours!*

Though I find Clark’s “blame the victim” rhetoric and tone quite problematic, what I find more problematic is the philosophy of personal agency that Clark implies in this “My motto is simple” speech. On my reading, the key terms are “blame,” “succeed,” “responsibility,” “parents,” and “White man.” For Clark, success likely refers to remaining in school, studying hard and getting good grades, passing standardized skills tests, graduating from high school, obtaining a job or going to college, paying taxes, not breaking laws, getting married, being a good neighbor and citizen, having children, buying a home, taking vacations, opening doors of opportunity yourself, and so on. For Clark, if these events do not eventually take place for the students, it will be their own fault, which he makes clear in the line, “The responsibility is *yours!*” For Clark, exercising agency is essentially an interpretive experience that, if exercised properly and routinely, will inevitably lead to success. He implies that taking responsibility is an internal act of interpreting our experiences in a way that does not attribute causes to any other sources. Clark expresses his belief that there is a clear danger in attributing causes to other sources in his references to “parents” and “the White man.” The term “parents” indexes not only one’s father and mother but many other “personal” and “local” elements of one’s life (other family members, relatives, one’s home, neighborhood, school, church, job, larger community, and so on). The term “White man” refers both to our country’s history of White racism as well as to the fact that the control of all the powerful institutions in our society (the economy, the government, the law, the media, higher education, and so on) rests almost totally in the hands of a White power structure. Clark commands his students not to look for any outside sources to understand the circumstances of their

lives. To do so is to play with fire because such searches for causes may tempt one to attribute “blame,” and for Clark, to “blame” is to fail in one’s interpretation of one’s life experiences. In a fighting fire with fire internal action, Clark implies that the way to ward off such a temptation to blame others or “the system” is to internalize the impulse and blame ourselves. This is the simple—and *ahistorical*—form of agency for Clark.³

In contrast to the ahistorical, “blame the victim” political message that Joe Clark espouses in *Lean on Me*, Dan Dunne articulates a politics that opposes such a message. Whereas Joe Clark exhorts students to blame themselves if they do not succeed in life, Dan Dunne teaches his students to study history for how various powerful forces have shaped the present political, social, and cultural conditions that the students live in. We see Dan teaching his students this message in four important classroom scenes, each of which I will describe in the next two sections.

The (Althusserian) “Machine”

One scene involves footage from the superb documentary *Berkeley in the Sixties* (1990), which is described on the DVD cover as follows:

The 1960s come to life in this gripping film [which] captures the decade’s events—the birth of the Free Speech Movement, civil rights marches, anti-Vietnam War protests, the counter-culture, the women’s movement, and the rise of the Black Panthers—in all their immediacy and passion. Dramatic archival footage interwoven with present-day interviews and 18 songs from the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, the Band, and the Jefferson Airplane make *Berkeley in the Sixties* [quoting here a blurb from the *Village Voice*] “probably the best documentary on the Sixties to date!”

The scene opens with footage of a student activist and leader of the Free Speech Movement, Mario Savio, delivering an impassioned speech in 1964 to a huge crowd gathered at Sproul Hall, which is the administration building at UC-Berkeley. Savio’s words are as follows:

There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can’t take part, you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop, and you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!

At this point, the camera pulls back and we see that Dan has shown his students this scene in class. Dan then asks the students, “What is this

machine that he's talking about? It's keeping us down. What is it?" The following dialogue exchanges take place:

Jamal: Like, robots and stuff, right?

Dan: Umm, it could be robots. It could be robots, but let's say it's a metaphor. He's saying this machine is keeping me down. Now what is that? What keeps us from being free? Ms. Drey?

Drey: Prisons. [She had visited her brother Mike in prison in an earlier scene.]

Dan: Absolutely, absolutely. Prisons. Okay? Prisons are definitely a part of it. What else?

Terrance: White.

Dan: White is definitely a part of it. The Man.

Lena: The school.

Dan: The school. Exactly. The whole education system is part of the machine. What else?

Stacey: Aren't you the machine, then?

Dan: [Affecting a "blackcent"] Oh no you didn't. What'd you say?

Stacey: Aren't you the machine?

Dan: You're saying I'm the machine?

Stacey: Yeah. You're White. You're part of the school.

Dan: Oh yeah, I guess you got a point. All right, so I'm part of the machine, but if I'm part of it, so are you. You are, too. We all are. And this is the thing, remember? Everything is made with opposing force. We may be opposed to the machine, but we're still very much a part of it, right? I work for the government, the school, but I'm also very much opposed to a lot of its policies. You guys hate coming to school, right?

Students: Yes!

Dan: Holler back if you heard me—

Students: Holler! [laughter]

Dan: You hate it, but you come anyway.

Student: Sometimes.

Dan: Sometimes, exactly.

At the beginning of the scene, Mario Savio uses the terms "machine" and "apparatus" synonymously, and one way to analyze the dialogic

critique that unfolds in this scene is through Althusser's (1971) chapter "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"⁴ (a text that Mario Savio likely knew very well). For example, Althusser explained that

in Marxist theory, the State Apparatus (SA) contains the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc., which constitute what I shall call . . . the Repressive State Apparatus [RSA]. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question "functions by violence"—at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms). (pp. 142-143)

Drey's identification of "Prisons" is straight out of Althusser's definition of RSA. And when Terrance identifies "White" (which Dan also calls "the Man") as another part of "the machine" that keeps people from being free, he might be said to capture the kernel of a critique that argues that all of the institutions that the Repressive State Apparatus contains are controlled by a White power structure that has owned and run this country since its beginnings. (Recall that for Joe Clark, such a critique of "White" was a sign of weakness and evasion of personal responsibility.)

Althusser (1971) also theorized another kind of apparatus: Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). These apparatuses belong "entirely to the *public domain*" (p. 144), and they include churches, culture industries, media, political parties, the educational system, and other such institutions. What distinguishes ISAs from the RSA is that they "*function by ideology*" (p. 145), which is to say not by physical violence but by gaining consent through non-violent means, consent given in some cases willingly, or in other cases unwillingly, but given nonetheless. And of the ISAs, Althusser (1971) argued that "what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number-one, i.e. as its dominant ideological State apparatus, is the educational system" (p.155). The articulation between Althusser and the scene in *Half Nelson* occurs, of course, in Lena's identification of the school as being part of the "machine," and then Dan and Stacey's back-and-forth dialogue about how Dan as a teacher—and all the students—are also part of the "machine," even if they are often unwilling participants within it.

The typical viewer of this scene would likely not be thinking in terms of Althusser's theorization of the RSA and the ISAs, but the same understanding of the scene would likely be arrived at, which is that Dan is engaging his students in a political discourse that has the goal of raising students' consciousness about how power operates in society. Where Dan is dialogic and encourages students to question and critique, Joe Clark in *Lean on Me* is authoritarian and commands students to be submissive and not to question the powers that be.

The Three Laws of Dialectics

Along with introducing the notion of “the machine,” in three other classroom scenes Dan also provides students with a definition of “History” and teaches them a particular way of understanding historical change: dialectics.

In one scene, which occurs very early in the film, Dan writes this on the green chalkboard:

What is History?

1. Opposites
- 2.
- 3.

Dan then asks the students, “What is history?” Terrance shouts out “Opposites,” to which Dan teases him about how well he can read the board. Another student, Stacey, offers the response “Change,” and Dan expands on this term by providing the following definition of history:

History is the study of change over time. And what’s change? It’s this. [Dan presses his fists together at the knuckles.] It’s opposites. It’s two things that push against each other in opposite directions. So the civil rights movement, okay, it’s essentially, it’s two opposing mentalities. In the South, the majority believes all men are not created equal, and there’s a minority who believes that they are, so that minority struggles and fights and pushes until eventually it becomes the majority. [Dan then injects some momentary humor, kidding the students here] Am I boring you? Huh? Let’s give you some examples, okay, of opposing forces, like, um, I’m going to go night and day. What else?

Students then reply with a variety of “opposites”: “Big and little”; “Left and right”; and “You and me” (Dan reformulates the last example into “Teacher and student”).

What is important to notice here is that along with providing a definition of history, Dan has also introduced one of the three “laws of dialectics” articulated by Frederick Engels.⁵ In *Dialectics of Nature* (1883),⁶ Engels explained that “the laws of dialectics . . . can be reduced in the main to three.” Engels listed these three laws as:

1. The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;
2. The law of the interpenetration of opposites;
3. The law of the negation of the negation.

In this scene, Dan has reformulated Engels’s “law of the interpenetration of opposites” into the simpler formulation of “Opposites.”⁷ According to Bertell Ollman (2003), the idea of “contradiction” is at the core

of dialectics, and what Ollman says about contradiction resonates with Dan's example of the law of "Opposites":

Contradiction is understood here as the incompatible development of different elements within the same relation, which is to say between elements ["opposing forces" in Dan's example] that are also dependent on one another. . . . [And] their paths of development do not only intersect in mutually supportive ways but are constantly blocking, undermining, otherwise interfering with, and in due course transforming one another [in Dan's example, the "minority struggles and fights and pushes until eventually it becomes the majority"]. (p. 17)

In another classroom scene, Dan introduces Engels's "law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*," which he reformulates (and writes on the board) as "Turning Points." We also see that on the blackboard, the term "Dialectics" has replaced the question "What is History?" (from the previous scene) that had been the heading of the list. Dan illustrates the "turning points" law of transformation in an interesting way for the students. He asks for a volunteer, "somebody who feels strong," and then the camera cuts to a shot in which we see Dan and Terrance (whose nickname is "T") sitting in desks and engaged in an arm-wrestling contest.⁸ Terrance is using two hands and seems to have Dan almost pinned, and as he and Terrance arm wrestle, Dan explains to the rest of the (very interested) students about "turning points": "So what we've got here is two opposing forces—Terrance and myself. And we're pushing against each other, and as long as one is stronger—and it looks like it's T—the change is slow and consistent. But once the other side becomes stronger"—now Dan grimaces, mustering all his strength, or so it seems, and reverses the dynamic of the arm wrestling match, so that he pins Terrance in one surge of power—"there's a turning point." Dan and Terrance shake hands while they disengage, and Dan says "Thank you, T." Then to the rest of the students, Dan says, "Make sense? Okay. Now, turning points can happen like that"—Dan gestures toward the desk where he and Terrance were arm wrestling—"they can be physical, or they can happen on a greater scale."

Of this "law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*," Ollman (2003) explains:

What is called quantity/quality is a relation between two temporally different moments within the same process. Every process contains moments of before and after, encompassing buildup (and builddown) and what that leads to. Initially, movement within any process takes the form of quantitative change. One or more of its aspects—each process being also a relation composed of aspects—increases or decreases in size or number. Then, at a certain [turning] point—which is different

for each process studied—a qualitative transformation takes place, indicated by a change in its appearance and/or function. (pp. 16-17)

Dan briefly describes another law of dialectics—that of “the negation of the negation”—in another scene. Though Dan does not name this law or write it on the board, he says “Number 3,” referring to the list of the laws of dialectics on the board, and adds: “Change moves in spirals, not circles.” Then he explains:

For example, the sun goes up and then it comes down, but every time that happens, what do you get? You get a new day. You get a new one. When you breathe, you inhale and then you exhale, but every single time that you do that, you’re a little bit different than the one before. We’re always changing and it’s important to know that there are some changes you can’t control, but there are others you can.

Of “the law of the negation of the negation,” Tom Bottomore (1983) explains that this law “claims that in the clash of opposites one opposite negates another and is in its turn negated by a higher level of historical development that preserves something of both negated terms (a process sometimes represented in the triadic schema of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis)” (p. 120).

Having described the scenes in which Dan defines history and introduces the three laws of dialectics, I will now turn to a discussion about how the film represents the positive effects of Dan’s teaching on his students. In other words, is there any evidence that Dan’s “political” teaching has raised his students’ critical consciousness?

Ghosts in the Machine

In my description of the classroom scene during which Dan defined history and introduced the dialectical law of “Opposites,” I did not describe the very last part of that scene because such a description is more appropriate here. Recall that after Dan gave his own example of an “opposite” (the Civil Rights Movement), he asked the students for more examples, which they provided. What I did not include, though, was one example volunteered by a student named Roodly, who makes a joke aimed at another student named Gina, saying: “Just wondering if you could count me and Gina’s baldheaded sister as opposites?” The rest of the students laugh, with a few crying out “Insult!” Dan then teasingly challenges Gina, saying: “Gina, come on, tell me you’re not going to take that? You got a bald sister? Is your sister bald? Give me something.” Gina responds to the challenge by glancing into her notebook, then looking over at Roodly and saying “May 17, 1954.” With the

kids laughing over this exchange of insult and response between Roodly and Gina, Dan goes to the board to where “Insults” is already written (it’s a permanent feature on the board), underneath which was at some earlier time written “Leah—August/1967.” To this, Dan writes Roodly’s name and the date “May 17/54.” Dan then explains to all of the students: “I expect some thought from you. I don’t want just dates and facts. I want to know why. I want to know consequences. I want to know what it means. All right?” Dan then jokes with Gina: “Now back—back to the bald sister? [Kids laugh.] What’s going on with that?”

This “insult” aspect of the scene is an important yet very subtle moment in the film because it reveals something about Dan’s pedagogical method. The meaning of what is happening here is explained on the DVD of *Half Nelson* when the film is viewed with the special feature “Filmmaker Commentary Featuring Writer/Director Ryan Fleck and Writer/Producer Ann Boden.” We hear Ryan Fleck explain (during the “insult” part of the scene): “In Mr. Dunne’s classroom, if you insult somebody, instead of getting detention or some kind of traditional punishment, . . . the person who is insulted gives that person a date, and they have to go look it up and give a report on it. And that’s kind of the idea of where these reports in the film come from.” Ann Boden (she and Fleck are life partners) adds, “You will see very shortly, later, Roodly will give a report on ‘Brown versus Board of Education,’ which is that date right there,” meaning the date that Gina gave in response to being insulted (May 17, 1954).

In fact, four “report” scenes appear in the film. Each scene is brief (only about a minute or so long) and the form of each scene is the same. At the beginning we see a close-up shot of a student who is staring directly into the camera, with what seems like a clean green chalkboard occupying the entire background. We see and hear the student delivering what is presumably part of a longer report, and within a few seconds, the image of the student is replaced by television news footage about (and from the time of) the historical event that the student is reporting on. This news imagery accompanies the student’s voice, and then near the end of the scene, the visual of the student reappears, replacing the news footage. When the student finishes speaking, the camera holds on the student’s face for a few seconds, and then there is a sudden cut to the next scene of the movie. These reports are given by Roodly, Terrence, Stacey, and Drey. The dialogue of each report is as follows (in the respective order of the students just given):

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled on the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, making it illegal for states to segregate public schools. This was a major step forward in the struggle for racial justice

and helped begin a flurry of bold and heroic actions known as the Civil Rights Movement.”

On September 13, 1971, 1200 Attica State Prison inmates seized control of the prison and took hostages to negotiate changes to their inhumane conditions. Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered a military assault on the prison, which killed twenty-nine inmates and ten hostages—every one caused from police gunshots. An official commission later stated, with the exception of Indian massacres in the late 19th century, the police assault was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War.

On November 1, 1977, Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. He was the first openly gay person to ever be elected to public office. A year later, he was assassinated by another member of the City Council named Dan White. [footage of Diane Feinstein in mid statement telling reporters: that “Harvey Milk has been shot and killed”]. Dan White claimed that he shot Milk because he ate too much junk food that day. This would later be known as the Twinkie Defense. [pause, then he turns his head to the right, presumably at Dan, who is not in the frame]. Is that for real?

On September 11, 1973, the CIA helped overthrow and murder democratically elected Chilean president Salvador Allende. The military coup led to mass disappearances, assassinations and tortures of thousands of Chilean civilians under the leadership of U.S.-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said of Allende’s 1970 election, quote, “These issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to decide for themselves.”

As is quite clear, the content of the students’ reports is political, and in each report, some aspect of “the machine” (discussed in the scene featuring Mario Savio) is critiqued. Roodly’s report critiques the “machinery” of institutionalized racism; Stacey’s report critiques the “machinery” of a culture of incarceration; Terrance’s report critiques the machinery of hatred that exists in our society for groups whose lifestyles diverge from the norm (and it is also a critique of the legal system); and Drey’s report critiques the “machinery” of covert U.S. interventions into the political affairs of other countries, interventions that replace democratically elected governments with murderous dictatorships. So the film offers momentary yet powerful representations of the positive effects of Dan’s teaching. On the surface, however, these political report scenes seem to interrupt the narrative suddenly and for no apparent reason. However, they actually serve an important and calculated role in the film, as is explained below in “Dialectics Within and Beyond.”

Goodbye, Mr. Chips (Hello, Mr. Dunne)

Thus far, I have explored the way that *Half Nelson* radically departs from the cliché of the ahistorical educator in the inner city teacher “savior” genre. Now, I will turn my discussion to the other main cliché that the film subverts, which is that *Half Nelson* does not offer a one-dimensional representation of an educator who is an unquestionable figure of moral authority, which is the case in all such “savior” films. Though everything in my selective summary of the film in the earlier section titled “The Song Remains the Same (or Does It?)” is accurate, I intentionally omitted what mainly sets the film apart from every other educator “savior” film, which is that the teacher, Dan Dunne, is a very flawed, complex person who has a serious cocaine habit. The film actually begins at a point when Dan’s life has already begun to spiral out of control.

We learn of Dan’s heavy use of cocaine early in the film (within ten minutes).⁹ After scenes featuring Dan teaching a class (the “What is History?” lesson) and coaching basketball practice, we see him in his shabby apartment,¹⁰ snorting lines of cocaine off a glass-top coffee table. Then we see him in a nightclub where he meets two women; they dance, they snort coke as the music pounds in the background, and eventually we see Dan alone in his car, driving to meet his drug dealer, from whom he buys some crack cocaine. In a scene that occurs the next day, Dan is coaching a girl’s basketball game, and afterward, in one of the most powerful scenes of the film—the one that sets the coordinates for the rest of the narrative—Dan does a check of the girl’s locker room to see if anyone is still there. Finding it empty, he goes into a bathroom stall and lights up his crack pipe. At some point, Dan (very high and semi-conscious) hears someone in the next stall, hears the toilet flush, and then hears a girl ask: “Somebody in there?” Dan (sweating, with a look of panic on his face) doesn’t reply, and when the door slowly opens, Drey is standing there. Dan says nothing, just stares at her. The camera focuses on the crack pipe in Dan’s hand, and Drey sees it. She says, “Oh, sorry,” and turns to leave, at which point Dan tries to get up but falls back. He calls to Drey, apologizes to her, extends his hand and asks “Can you help me up?” She does, but Dan is still too disoriented, and so he lies on his back on the floor. He asks for some water, and Drey wets a paper towel and hands it to him. Dan then asks her, “Just don’t go, okay? Just for a minute?” The scene ends with Drey kneeling beside Dan, with Dan holding Drey’s hand in his, pressing the paper towel to his forehead.

This scene alone, being unimaginable in any teacher savior films, marks *Half Nelson* as a very different kind of teacher story. If *Half Nelson* were a traditional teacher savior film, this early scene would likely func-

tion to set up some kind of drastic change in Dan's drug use—perhaps Dan would promise Drey that he would stop using drugs if she would keep his secret. Then, through the rest of the film, we would be able to see a newly clean and sober Dan as he valiantly attempts to keep Drey safe from the neighborhood drug dealer, Frank. Fortunately, the film refuses such a cliché. Drey does not reveal Dan's secret to anyone, and so what we get is something much more complex and nuanced than might be expected.

Dialectics Within and Beyond

In a review of *Half Nelson* (*Canberra Times*, 2007), the director Ryan Fleck is quoted as saying: “[My father] told me he was doing this thing [on dialectics for kids, see footnote 7] and I looked at it and thought, oh, this is great, this idea of opposing forces. . . . This is perfect for this character, who's trying to teach his pupils that they can change the world but he's also trying to teach himself” (p. 4). Even without this acknowledgement by the director, most everyone who sees *Half Nelson* will discern how important the idea of “opposing forces” is, both to the representation of the teacher that it constructs, as well as to the development of the plot. And because I have already introduced a discussion of dialectics, I now can draw on it as I continue my analysis of the representation of Dan as he moves through the film's narrative.¹¹

Dan can be viewed as a cinematic figure within whom two forces are “opposing” one another. One force is that part of him that caused him to become a teacher in the inner city and that has made him (and still makes him) a good teacher committed to issues of social justice and political engagement; the other force is that part of him that causes him to use drugs to the point of self-destruction. From what I have already presented in the previous sections, we can derive some sense of the duality of Dan's personality. The classroom and political reports scenes can be thought of as being the effect of his “positive” side, while the locker room drug scene is an effect of his “negative” side. What was not made clear in the previous sections of this article is that the tensions between these two aspects of Dan's personality build and play themselves out dialectically as the narrative deepens. And there is a spiraling movement, a recurring dynamic at work within the narrative, which is brought out through a careful process of juxtaposition of scenes.

This process of juxtaposition is apparent early in the film. The “What is History? Opposites” classroom scene is followed soon after by the scene in which Drey discovers Dan's secret in the locker room, which itself is soon followed by Roodly's political report about “*Brown vs. the Board of*

Education.” Here, the negative drug scene appears within two positive pedagogical scenes, and the effect of the juxtaposition of these scenes is that a contradiction in Dan’s personality is made visible. This dynamic of “opposites” that is performed through the juxtaposition of these early classroom and political reports with drug scenes recurs later on in the narrative, when Dan’s drug use gets even more out of control.

This theme of “opposing forces” or “opposites” not only plays itself out within Dan but also beyond his internal experiences, in his relations with others. The main relation, of course, revolves around Drey, and it occurs between Dan and Frank. As mentioned earlier, Dan gradually becomes aware of who Frank is (the neighborhood drug dealer) and how he has designs on Drey, hoping to lure her into becoming a drug deliverer and eventually a dealer, like her brother. The film juxtaposes many scenes that show Drey with Dan (both in and out of the classroom) and Drey with Frank, mostly in their neighborhood. And though Frank deals drugs, he is not a stereotype of the drug dealer. He doesn’t use drugs himself, he is handsome and seductive, and he feels protective of Drey, even while at the same time he is trying to involve her in his drug operation. In other words, like Dan, Frank is not a one-dimensional figure, and though he has his “negative” side, there are also “positive” aspects of his personality.

Through a series of scenes, the tensions between Dan and Frank build, and the confrontation between the two occurs when Drey asks Dan if he thinks she will ever end up like her brother, Mike. Dan is taken aback by her question (shocked, really), and in the next scene, we see him at Frank’s house. He exits his car and strides toward Frank, who is outside with some friends. At this point, the film seems set to bring about a turning point in Dan, perhaps showing him as the teacher savior the film has secretly been planning all along. So Dan confronts Frank. He asks Frank to leave Drey alone, and after a series of exchanges, this dialogue takes place:

Frank: Why are you so fucking angry, man?

Dan: Because you are not listening to me—

Frank: I’m right here, baby, tell me what you’re talking about.

Dan: I’m telling you to do something good.

Frank: Oh.

Dan: Are you capable of that?

Frank: Oh, so now we back to the point of what is White is right, right?
So—

Dan: —Fuck, this has nothing to do with that and you know it—

Frank: —no, no, no—it’s good for Drey to have somebody like you looking out for her. Mr. Model A1 fucking citizen.

Dan: I don’t know. I don’t know! Fuck. Because I’m supposed to do something, right? But what am I supposed to do?

Far from depicting Dan as a savior, what is brought out in this scene is that even though Dan is still driven by the desire to protect and care for his students, even to the point of risking physical harm (at the hands of Frank), he no longer has whatever he might have had to make any kind of difference. As a drug abuser, he has no moral authority (which Frank makes crystal clear), and he also cannot sustain the will he mustered to confront Frank. After he asks Frank, “But what am I supposed to do?” Frank offers him something to drink, and eventually he asks Dan if he wants some “candy,” and a few short scenes later, we see Dan alone in his car, high, late at night, headed for trouble.

Though this theme of “Opposites” plays out in many other ways in the film, my purpose in this section is to be suggestive (through a few examples) rather than exhaustive in my analysis.

The Dialectic Continues

I began this article by explaining that my main intention was to analyze the figure of the teacher in *Half Nelson* in terms of two main clichés of the “teacher savior” film. I identified one of those clichés as being that cinematic teacher saviors are always figures of unquestionable moral purity and authority, and as I have sought to show, Dan Dunne is unquestionably not such a teacher. His heavy drug use has not only turned his personal life into a disaster, but it has also begun to compromise his professional life as a teacher, which is brought out very early in the film (when Drey finds him stoned and barely conscious in the girl’s bathroom) and later on when he mounts a doomed effort to take the moral high ground in his confrontation with Frank, the drug dealer who has predatory designs for luring Drey deeper into his world.

The other main cliché that I identified is that cinematic teacher saviors are also *ahistorical* in their pedagogy and in their understanding of how change can occur. For Joe Clark in *Lean on Me*, change could only occur once students accepted that they were singularly responsible for their life circumstances and their future development in society, and he chided them from looking to history for explanations to help them understand their life circumstances, claiming that to do so would all be a matter of “blaming” others (people and institutions) for one’s own

personal weaknesses and failings. As I think I have shown, *Half Nelson* departs from (and arguably subverts) this cliché of the *ahistorical* savior figure by offering a representation of a teacher who engages his students in thinking about the role that historical forces have played in shaping current societal circumstances and institutions. Dan Dunne draws on political documentaries (the scene of Mario Savio from *Berkeley in the Sixties*), introduces a theory of historical change (dialectics), and creates situations for students to engage in historical research (the reports they give), all of which congeals into a pedagogy that centrally situates “History” as a focus of study and discussion.

I also stated at the beginning that I had conceptualized this article as an introductory text that might be assigned to students who would subsequently engage in further analyses of *Half Nelson*. What I will do now is suggest some possible topics for discussion or further analysis, and because I have avoided including any big “spoilers” in what I have written, most of these discussion topics focus attention on plot and character elements that I necessarily have not explored in my own analysis.

- In the introduction, I summarized Hall’s (1980) theory of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings, and I have presented my own reading of the pedagogical figure of Dan Dunne, an exclusively preferred (and admittedly very partial) reading that focuses mainly on the classroom scenes. Of course, an oppositional reading could be performed by someone who wholly disagrees with my interpretations of these classroom scenes. Such an oppositional reading might address these questions: Does the fact that some students are dozing off or not paying full attention to Dan reveal that he really isn’t a very good teacher? In assigning students to do homework (the political reports) as punishment for insulting one another, does Dan engage in a bad pedagogical practice? By ignoring the official curriculum (the civil rights binder that the principal mentions) and instead teaching students a theory of historical change (dialectics), isn’t Dan being “too political” in his pedagogy, in effect forcing (albeit seductively) his own “left” view of how the world works onto his students?
- The topic I began about the role that the classroom and political reports scenes play in the film (in “Ghosts in the Machine”) could be fleshed out. I stated that these scenes function dialectically as “positive” elements within a narrative that pulls Dan deeper down a “negative” path. I gave one example of how this process of juxtaposition works with the “What Is History? Opposites”

scene (juxtaposed with Roodly's political report). For this topic, the rest of the classroom and political report scenes can be analyzed for how they function as "positive" elements within a narrative that shows Dan spiraling out of control.

- In the section titled "Dialectics Within and Beyond," I discuss one key scene that reveals the dialectical relation between Dan and Frank. However, many more scenes throughout the film develop the complicated nature of their dialectical relation, so an analysis of these scenes can be undertaken to fully explore the oppositional relation between Frank and Dan. Also, the other main dialectical relation that takes place concerns Drey, who is pulled in different directions by Dan and Frank, two influential people in her life, each of whom is far from being a solid role model and a trustworthy influence, which complicates her dilemma. So Drey's dialectical relations, as they involve both Dan and Frank, can also be fully explored.

- *Half Nelson* offers an explanation, through a few scenes (especially some near the end of the film), of how Dan acquired his idealistic commitment to social justice and racial equity, as well as his how he acquired his way of dealing with problems through self-destructive behaviors. Are the film's attempts at such explanations about Dan's personality convincing to you?

- Just as someone might have an oppositional reading to my interpretation of Dan's teaching as it is depicted in the classroom scenes, so too might someone have an oppositional reading of my overall argument that *Half Nelson* breaks with two fundamental clichés of the teacher savior genre. For example, by focusing on one teacher's story, *Half Nelson* might be said to reside fully within the individualistic "charismatic educator" savior film. There is also a "savior" theme at work in the film. So an important question to address is: Does *Half Nelson*, which shares some of the characteristics of a teacher savior film, fundamentally subvert the main clichés of that subgenre? Of course, to fully answer this question would require viewing one or more teacher savior films to make comparisons with *Half Nelson*, films such as *Blackboard Jungle*; *To Sir, with Love*; *Stand and Deliver*; *Lean on Me*; *The Principal*; *Dead Poets Society*; *Dangerous Minds*; and *Freedom Writers*.

These discussion topics and questions are by no means the only ones that might be addressed, and my hope is that other academics in

education will take *Half Nelson* seriously as a productive text in their work with preservice teachers, and that more articles about the film's pedagogical possibilities will appear.

Notes

¹ By “readers,” I am imagining student teachers in methods courses or social foundations courses, as well as students in graduate courses that have a cultural studies orientation. I am also imagining those (professors and graduate students) who teach these students.

² Most academics who write articles or book chapters about school films perform full-scale ideological analyses that (seem to) assume a reader who has already seen the film (so the author includes such “spoiler” details). An exemplar of such an analysis is Giroux's superb article about *Dangerous Minds*. (See other examples in Giroux's (2002) book *Breaking in to the Movies*.)

³ For an in-depth analysis of this “ahistorical” aspect of *Lean on Me*, see Trier, 2004.

⁴ It is worth mentioning here that I teach a graduate course titled “Cultural Studies and Education,” and as it happens, I have always assigned Althusser's chapter in tandem with *Berkeley in the Sixties* because these two texts articulate perfectly with one another and illuminate the arguments being made in each other (or so I have argued in the course).

⁵ In my course “Cultural Studies and Education,” I also have students read about the theory and method of dialectics (we read selections from Ollman, 2003) and then analyze how some of the laws of dialectics are represented in the film *I Heart Huckabees* (Trier, 2009).

⁶ See: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/ch02.htm>

⁷ It is worth pointing out something I discovered when I was researching the critical reviews of *Half Nelson*. Though I had already worked out my analysis of the “dialectics” scenes, as well as the whole theme of “dialectics” that structures the film, I found out that the director of the film, Ryan Fleck, was deeply influenced by his father about the “dialectics” theme of the film. In a *New York Times* review, Dennis Lim (2006), who interviewed Ryan Fleck, stated: “Mr. Fleck's father, Jack Lucero Fleck, a San Francisco traffic engineer, was a central influence on *Half Nelson*. A dialectics autodidact, the senior Mr. Fleck maintains a Website, <http://dialectics4kids.com>, which includes educational stories and MP3's of songs like ‘Do Our Lives Go Round in Circles?’ Many of [Dan Dunne's] classroom monologues are lifted almost verbatim from the site” (p. 17).

⁸ This is an apt time to note that the title *Half Nelson* refers to a wrestling move that, though it can immobilize an opponent, it cannot by itself lead to pinning the opponent. Also, when *Half Nelson* is viewed with the “Filmmaker Commentary” feature on, Ryan Fleck points out a poster of Nelson Mandela in Dan's classroom, and he also refers to how originally the script called for a Miles Davis song titled “Half Nelson” to be playing in one scene in which Dan is sitting alone having a drink in a jazz bar (the cost of using the song was too high, so it did not make it into the movie).

⁹ Dan's last name, Dunne, evokes a feeling in the film that something in Dan is about to be "done," though not until he is "undone."

¹⁰ Of his apartment, one film reviewer (Dargis, 2006) wrote: "Dan lives with his cat in an apartment filled with books, pages from an unfinished project and furniture that looks dragged in off the street. It's the kind of apartment that the poor hold onto until they can't hold on any longer, the kind of dump that cops break into so they can pull out the dead, which makes it the perfect home for a death wish" (p. 8).

¹¹ My method of presentation in this section differs from the one I used in the previous sections. Just as most of the scenes in *Half Nelson* were shot as close-ups, my discussions so far have been focused "close up" on relatively brief segments of the film. Now, I will pull back in order to take in more, and I will move at a faster pace (even impressionistically) as I follow Dan through the main narrative developments.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes toward an investigation) (pp. 127-186). In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, Ben Brewster (trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Anonymous, The politics of idealism. (2007, April 25). *Canberra Times*, p. A4.
- Avildsen, J. (Director). (1989). *Lean on me* [Motion Picture]. Los Angeles: Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Ayers, W. (1994). A teacher ain't nothin' but a hero: Teachers and teaching in film (pp. 147-156). In P. Joseph & G. Burnaford (Eds.), *Images of schoolteachers in twentieth-century America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Bottomore, T. (Ed.). (1983). *A dictionary of Marxist thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dalton, M. (1999). *The Hollywood curriculum: Teachers and teaching in the movies*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Dargis, M. (2006, August 11). Teacher has a problem, student knows the secret, and two lives intertwine. *New York Times*, p. E8.
- Edelman, R. (1983). Teachers in the movies. *American Educator*, 7(3), 26-31.
- Farber, P., & Holms, G. (1994). A brotherhood of heroes: The charismatic educator in recent American movies (pp. 21-39). In P. Farber, E. Provenzo, & G. Holm (Eds.), *Schooling in the light of popular culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Fleck, R. (Director). (2006). *Half Nelson* [Motion Picture]. Los Angeles: Think-Film.
- Giroux, H. (2002). *Breaking in to the movies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding (pp. 128-138). In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kitchell, M. (Director). (1990). *Berkeley in the sixties* [Motion Picture]. Los Angeles: Kitchell Films.
- Lim, D. (2006, July 30). Opposing forces lash together by faith. *New York Times*,

- Arts & Leisure, p. 17.
- Ollman, B. (2003). *Dance of the dialectic: Steps in Marx's method*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Paul, D. (2001). Critically interrogating Hollywood's vision of the urban classroom. *Multicultural Review*, 10(1), 20-27 & 58-60.
- Trier, J. (2001). The cinematic representation of the personal and professional lives of teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 28(3), 127-142.
- Trier, J. (2004). Detournement as pedagogical praxis. *Journal of Thought*, 39(4), 35-52.
- Trier, J. (2005). "Sordid Fantasies': Reading popular 'inner city' school films as racialized texts with preservice teachers. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(2), 171-189.
- Trier, J. (2009). Subversive engagements in teacher education. In F. Benson & C. Riches (Eds.), *Engaging in conversation about ideas in teacher education* (pp. 117-129). New York: Peter Lang.