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HEGEMONY IN THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL: A GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how Antonio Gramsci's four core concepts — hegemony, common sense, consent, and counter-hegemony — operate within Netflix's *The School for Good and Evil* (2022). While previous studies on this film have primarily focused on beauty myths and physical stereotypes, this paper offers a comprehensive critical approach to revealing how ideological power functions across the film's narrative, character representations, and institutional dynamics. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method through textual analysis, conducted via systematic close viewing of dialogues, character actions, and narrative arcs. The findings demonstrate that the school institution functions as a civil society apparatus that naturalizes dominant standards of Good and Evil through the role of organic intellectuals, sustains them through the voluntary consent of its subjects, and ultimately absorbs resistance without structural change. Furthermore, the study reveals that while counter-hegemonic potential emerges through Agatha's critical stance, it remains limited in scope and falls short of constituting true Gramscian counter-hegemony. This research contributes an innovative perspective by comprehensively applying classical Gramscian political theory to contemporary popular fantasy film, thereby enriching both cultural studies and literary criticism in the field of media and film analysis.

Keywords: common sense; consent; counter-hegemony; hegemony; Gramsci

INTRODUCTION

Film, as a form of popular culture, has the capacity to shape how audiences interpret social reality, including conceptions of what is considered good, normal, and acceptable (Shapiro & Storey, 2022). From a sociological perspective, literary works cannot be separated from their surrounding social contexts, as texts are always connected

to the society in which they are produced and consumed (Wellek & Warren, 1949). This reciprocal relationship makes film not merely entertainment, but a medium that actively shapes, maintains, or challenges prevailing societal values.

Among various film genres, fantasy and fairy tale adaptations occupy a strategic position in the formation of collective moral values, especially for children and adolescents. The Western fairy tale tradition, dominated by Disney productions since the 20th century, has constructed consistent and repetitive visual representations: good characters are synonymous with attractive appearances, bright colors, and gentleness, while evil characters are constructed as dark and frightening figures (Do Rozario, 2004). This pattern of representation is repeated massively across productions to the point that it is no longer perceived as a narrative choice, but rather as a natural and universal truth that is taken for granted by the audience. According to (Vaidya & Osman, 2024), this kind of aesthetic stereotype not only influences how a person is perceived, but also has ethical implications, especially for young audiences who consume it as a moral reference.

A number of contemporary works have begun to deviate from these representational conventions, including the Netflix film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), adapted from Soman Chainani's 2013 novel, is among the most striking examples. The film tells the story of Sophie, a beautiful girl who believes she will become a princess, and her best friend Agatha, considered a witch by the villagers, who are both kidnapped and taken to the magical School for "Good" and "Evil". The film's central deviation lies in its classification system, where Sophie, who visually and behaviorally embodies all the attributes of "goodness" in the tradition of classical fairy tales, is placed in the Evil group, while Agatha, who appears gloomy, indifferent, and curt, is classified as Good. This reversal is significant not only because it introduces novelty into the plot, but also because it demonstrates that seemingly stable systems of moral classification can easily be challenged when the characters who most closely align with stereotypes are placed in different categories. This situation suggests that standards of "goodness" that have long been considered natural are actually the result of social constructions that are continuously maintained through repetition, not something that stems from inherent moral truth.

Previous research applying Gramsci's hegemonic framework to film consistently demonstrates that institutions serve as primary sites of ideological control. Khomeini

(2025), in his analysis of *V for Vendetta*, demonstrated that hegemony operates through consent constructed and embedded within state institutions, not solely through the overt use of violence. Similarly, Adawiyah et al. (2024) found in *Wild Child* that boarding schools function as hegemonic apparatuses that discipline minority subjects to conform to dominant cultural norms through enforced rules, language standards, and behavioral expectations. However, both studies focused more on the mechanisms of hegemony's reproduction and internalization processes, thus paying little attention to the possibility of institutions becoming arenas for the emergence of resistance to the order they construct.

To analyze this problem, this research also uses Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which explains how the ruling class maintains its dominance not only through physical force or violence, but also through culturally and ideologically constructed agreements. In this theory, there are four main interrelated concepts, namely: (1) hegemony, (2) common sense, (3) consent, and (4) counter-hegemony. This conceptual framework is relevant to understanding how *The School for Good and Evil* does not merely passively represent the established fairytale order but also reveals the logic of its classification as a hegemonic construction that can be questioned from within (Zhafiira & Suardi, 2025).

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze how the film *The School for Good and Evil* represents a rejection of hegemony through the reversal of the construction of "Good" and "Evil" characters. The focus of this research lies in how the film challenges moral categories that have been accepted as something natural in the fairy tale tradition. Thus, this study seeks to reveal how the film not only questions the moral standards inherited from the fairy tale tradition but also constructs a counter-hegemonic narrative that shakes the dominant logic through representational strategies that can be identified in the film text.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony offers a relevant analytical framework for examining how fairy tales like *The School for Good and Evil* operate ideologically. Unlike the orthodox Marxist approach, which views domination solely through physical coercion, Gramsci (2020) demonstrated that the most enduring form of power operates through the cultural construction of consent. In this process, subordinated groups not only accept but actively reproduce the dominant class's worldview as natural and proper. This

distinction makes Gramscian hegemony relevant to analyzing popular films, as cinema, as an institution of civil society, is a crucial arena where social consent is produced and maintained.

At the heart of this framework is the concept of common sense, a set of assumptions so deeply internalized that they no longer appear as ideology but as self-evident and universally valid truths (Fauziah, 2018). In the Western fairy tale tradition, the equation of good with beauty and gentleness, and evil with ugliness and hostility, has functioned as this kind of hegemonic common sense. Because they are repeated across generations, these representational codes appear not as cultural constructions but as established truths. Gramsci's framework allows for a more critical analysis of these assumptions by showing that what are often considered natural and immutable narrative conventions actually reflect the interests of dominant cultural groups in society.

The relevance of this framework to *The School for Good and Evil* is further demonstrated through the concept of counter-hegemony. Gramsci did not view hegemony as a fixed and unchallengeable system. He argued that subordinated groups have the capacity to construct counter-hegemonic projects through the development of alternative ideologies and cultural practices that challenge the dominance of common sense within the institution itself (Khomeini, 2025). The film's reversal of fairy tale classifications, placing the conventionally "good-looking" Sophie in the school of Evil and the gloomy Agatha in the school of Good, can be read as a counter-hegemonic strategy. The film does not simply invert the fairy tale formula, but exposes the formula itself as a questionable construct.

However, Gramsci's framework must be applied with due consideration of its original context. Gramsci developed the concept of counter-hegemony within the context of organized class struggle, a war of position that requires sustained ideological work and a coherent collective consciousness, not merely individual narrative disruption (Gramsci, 2020). In the context of a commercial film like *The School for Good and Evil*, questions arise as to the extent to which seemingly subversive representations actually function as counter-hegemonic narratives, or have instead become part of the mechanisms of the culture industry. Therefore, this study does not position the film as a completely counter-hegemonic text, but rather uses Gramsci's concepts to examine the extent to which the film is able to challenge the hegemonic common sense of the fairy tale tradition and

identify the limits of such challenges.

Academic studies of *The School for Good and Evil* have largely focused on issues of femininity and the representation of beauty. Bowo (2025) examined the beauty myths reproduced in the film, showing how female characters actively challenge dominant beauty stereotypes by basing their self-worth not on physical appearance, but on personal qualities such as empathy and courage. Using Naomi Wolf's framework, the study identified five categories of beauty myths operating in the film: work, culture, religion, sex, and violence. These findings collectively demonstrate a rejection of the view that links a woman's worth solely to her physical appearance. These results align with Salsabila et al. (2025) analysis of the novel adaptation, which shows that Sophie and Agatha are constructed as contrasting symbols of beauty and ugliness through visual signifiers. Sophie is associated with beauty through fair skin, light hair, and luminous clothing, while Agatha is depicted with the opposite characteristics. However, both studies emphasize that outward appearance does not determine a character's moral character. Sophie's beauty conceals her selfish and ambitious nature, while Agatha's appearance, which defies conventional beauty standards, is portrayed as possessing genuine kindness and courage.

The main similarity between these two studies lies in their focus on the characters' bodies and appearances as the primary arenas for ideological struggle. Both analyses focus on how the characters are visually represented and the meanings associated with these representations. However, neither study examines the structural dimensions at work in the film, specifically how the institutional categories of "Good" and "Evil" within the school operate as hegemonic mechanisms that shape identity, regulate moral standards, and achieve social approval. Furthermore, neither study explores in depth how the characters respond to, negotiate, or even challenge these structures. This gap serves as the starting point for this study. Using Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, this study focuses on the social systems that shape power relations in the film, rather than solely on the individual representations of the characters.

This study applies a qualitative approach with a textual analysis method to examine the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) as its primary data source. Data collection was conducted through a close viewing technique, where the film was observed repeatedly to gather critical visual and textual data, including dialogues, character actions,

and narrative arcs. The collected data were then categorized based on the structural progression of the ruling system’s domination and the subsequent subversion within the narrative.

The data analysis framework is grounded in Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which serves to dissect how power operates through four core concepts: first, identifying the hegemony and the role of characters who act as organic intellectuals in naturalizing school standards; second, evaluating how the “Good vs. Evil” forms a symmetrical common sense; third, analyzing the voluntary consent internalized by the students; and fourth, assessing the characters’ capacity to resist. Finally, the method links these textual representations to the broader concept of cultural resistance in popular media, demonstrating how the film’s specific representational strategies successfully dismantle traditional narrative rules to project a more just and humane perspective on identity diversity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that hegemony in the *School for Good and Evil* involved the school institution functions as a civil society apparatus that naturalizes dominant standards of Good and Evil through the role of organic intellectuals, sustains them through the voluntary consent of its subjects, and ultimately absorbs resistance without structural change. The study reveals that while counter-hegemonic potential emerges through Agatha’s critical stance, it remains limited in scope and falls short of constituting true Gramscian counter-hegemony. The findings are summarized in the following table.

Table 1 Data Classification Table

NO	Concept	Definition	Indicators
1	Hegemony	The domination through consent	Hierarchy as a natural thing
2	Common Sense	The hegemonized ideology is perceived as natural	Rules are treated as moral truths
3	Consent	Voluntary obedience	Obedience to or admiration for authority
4	Counter-Hegemony	Resistance against the dominant hegemony	Narratives or actions that question hegemony

Hegemony

The hegemony in this film operates not only through the institution of school as a *civil society* apparatus, but also is controlled by a specific figure, namely Rafal, who hides his personal agenda behind the facade of a seemingly neutral institutional system. In the opening scene, as one of the two Schoolmasters who founded the system, Rafal reveals the motives behind the system he and his brother, Rhian, have built over thousands of years:

Rafal: “Thousands of years, you always gave the heroes the upper hand! I held the balance with you. It’s my turn now. I dictate the terms. And it’s going to be a very different world.”

Rhian: “We can work together.”

Rafal: “Evil doesn’t cooperate. When I’m done... Evil won’t lose.”

(Feig, 2022,00:03:07)

This dialogue reveals that the Good/Evil system is not a neutral moral order, but rather a power construct designed from the outset for one-sided gain. The school does not present itself as Rafal’s personal project; instead, it presents itself as a natural, ancient order. Rafal, as the supreme power holder hiding behind an institution, is a clear example of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. He does not enforce his will through violence, but rather through a system of rules that appears legitimate, reasonable, and natural to all within it.

This system is operated in the field by two key organic intellectuals: Professor Dovey at the *School for Good* and Lady Lesso at the *School for Evil*. Both apply abstract system standards to everyday practice so that they seem natural and unquestionable. At the School for Good, feminism is taught as a form of power:

Prof. Dovey: “Let me guess. You’re not a pink person? Not a problem! We also have rose, fuchsia, blush, watermelon, hibiscus.”

(Feig, 2022,00:26:20)

Shopie: “Aggie! They gave you gown?”

(Feig, 2022,00:27:00)

Prof. Anemone: “I am here to show you how to become a truly powerful woman through beauty. A lady’s smile is a sword in the battle for life and for true love.”

(Feig, 2022,00:49:12)

Meanwhile, at the School for Evil, Lady Lesso teaches the opposite, yet equally

absolute, standards. The emphasis here is on cruelty, destructive talent, and the development of villain identities:

Lady Lesso: “Every villain has a special talent they can hone into a powerful weapon to defeat their nemesis. Your story will not end until one of you is destroyed.”

(Feig, 2022,01:00:30)

Prof. Manley: “Uglify! Why do we need to be ugly?”

Hort: “Oh, because it makes little children cry.”

Prof. Manley: “Wrong. That’s merely a bonus. Why be revolting and repugnant?”

Sophie: “My question exactly.”

Prof. Manley: “Ah, not caring how you look forces you to use your intelligence. Ugliness is freedom!”

((Feig, 2022)00:48:10))

Lady Lesso: “Rafal only wants one who’s truly Evil. It’s clear your beauty is keeping you and others from accepting who you really are.”

(Feig, 2022, 01:17:00)

What is interesting about these statements is that they do not present themselves as preferences or cultural norms, but as truths about power. This rhetorical strategy is what makes them hegemonic, not merely prescriptive. The teachers do not say, “We prefer you to be beautiful” or “We think ugliness is useful;” they say that beauty is power and ugliness is freedom, as if they were discovered facts, not socially constructed standards.

The hegemony here is not merely representational but structural. It is embedded in the curriculum, the spatial separation between the two schools, and the authority of the teachers who speak in the name of universal truth. Thus, the hegemony in this film is more insidious than mere beauty stereotypes; it is a system that trains its subjects to teach each other standards that perpetuate their own subordination.

Common Sense

The *common sense* operating in this film is a long-standing legacy of classical fairytale tradition, where beauty, gentleness, and obedience are automatically considered Good, while ugliness, cruelty, and deviance are inherently Evil. This standard is so deeply ingrained in the characters that the reversal of Sophie and Agatha’s positions immediately triggers the film’s central conflict. Gramsci (1971) defined *common sense* as a belief so deeply rooted that it appears not as an ideology but as an absolute truth that applies to everyone. By attempting to portray this disruption of common sense, the film actually

shows how strongly this belief has been naturalized, not as a cultural preference, but as a self-evident truth about the moral order of the world.

The film's opening narration explicitly affirms this standard from the very first minute:

Storian: "Once upon a time, there lived a girl named Sophie. A brave creature of exquisite beauty and uncommon grace... who was destined to change the world."

(Feig, 2022, 00:04:30)

The rhetorical structure of this narrative is particularly interesting. Beauty and destiny are presented as if they have a causal relationship without requiring any explanation. The narrative does not argue that beautiful people are destined for greatness; it simply assumes it. This assumption is accepted without resistance because the audience has absorbed the same fairytale logic through generations of exposure.

However, the most productive moment of common sense in the film comes from the reaction of the School for Good students to Agatha's arrival:

Reena: "Ugh. What the hell is it?"
Beatrix: "It looks like a witch."
Millicent: "I'm thinking of a troll."
Chinen: "I say demon."
Kiko: "Maybe part hunchback?"
Agatha: "I don't have a hunch."
Reena: "Then you really need a tailor."

(Feig, 2022, 00:20:15)

What deserves critical attention is not the cruelty of the reaction, but rather its source. The judgment came from students at the School for Good, a group whose institutional identity is built on values of virtue, kindness, and moral superiority. However, the spontaneous rejection of Agatha solely based on her appearance reveals a fundamental contradiction within this hegemonic system. The institution that most loudly claims to represent goodness is also the one most tied to aesthetic standards that have nothing to do with a person's moral character. In this context, the concept of goodness has been conflated and even replaced by judgments based on aesthetics. Neither the students nor the teachers recognize this contradiction as a contradiction because the common sense equating the two has been so deeply internalized that it has become invisible.

Furthermore, Sophie redefined the standard of “normal” when confronted by the Schoolmaster:

The Schoolmaster: “What is the one thing that Evil can never have that Good can never do without?”

Sophie: “Oh, I know. Manners. A castle. Amazing hair. A horse.”

Agatha: “True love.”

Storian: “Which is traditionally in a kiss.”

(Feig, 2022, 00:45:52)

While the physical standards Sophie mentions are not the primary distinguishing factor between Good and Evil, “true love” suggests that things related to warmth, feeling, and affection are not something that Evil, which is often associated with violence, can possess.

A similar common sense operates on the Evil side. As soon as Sophie first arrives at the School for Evil, the Nevers students immediately judge her unworthy of their company based on her appearance—but with a view that’s the exact opposite of the Good camp. Anadil states emphatically:

Anadil: “Let me guess. It’s Belle. Or Anastasia. Or Sugar Palm.”

Sophie: “Actually, my name is Sophie.”

[Crunches loudly] [Both Cackling]

Dot: “That’s a funny name for a villain.”

Anadil: “Oh, please. She’s so not a villain.”

(Feig, 2022, 00:36:13)

Not only by looking at physical appearance, even simple things like names have their own standards to be categorized as suitable or not for an Evil person. This section is the most concrete evidence in showing that the common sense of aesthetics works symmetrically on both sides: the Good students reject Agatha for being considered too ‘ugly’, while the Evil students reject Sophie for being too ‘beautiful’. Therefore, the standards of the ancient fairy tale are not only believed by the Good students, but also held by the Evil students as a benchmark for their own identity.

This symmetry has great analytical significance because it shows that both schools are trapped in the same aesthetic ideology, only with the signs reversed. Neither of them questions why appearance should determine moral classification. To question this is to

question the entire system that gives meaning to their identities. This is the deepest function of hegemonic common sense: it is not only trusted but also necessary, because dismantling it means dismantling the very foundations of the self-formation of the subjects who live within it.

Consent

Consent in this film occurs equally in both the School for Good and the School for Evil. Within Gramsci's (2020) framework, consent is the "voluntary" agreement of a hegemonic group. This condition can arise because ideology has been internalized as part of personal desires and identities, so that compliance arises from within, not from external coercion.

On the Good side, Sophie represents consent, most obedient to the system's rules. Good's standards for her were formed long before she entered the school system. This agreement was built through a process of socialization of the fairy tales that he experienced in the village over many years, even before institutional authorities had the opportunity to impose it directly. As a result, when she is placed in the School for Evil, Sophie does not question the system's existence, but simply rejects the results of her placement:

Sophie: "No! You're supposed to drop me at the Good school, not her! No, take me back! Please! No! You don't understand! I'm Good!"

(Feig, 2022, 00:18:20)

An important aspect of this statement is that Sophie is not in a position to dispute what she considers an unfair accusation. Rather, she is defending the system's right to classify her correctly. Sophie is not saying that the system is wrong; she is saying that the system has misplaced her. This distinction is crucial because her anger is not a form of resistance, but rather evidence of her deep-seated agreement with the system. Sophie has internalized the Good/Evil dichotomy to such an extent that her primary response to institutional injustice is not to question the institution's legitimacy, but rather to demand that the institution perform its functions more accurately. Therefore, when Hort tries to approach her and reveal the truth, Sophie immediately rejects him:

Hort: "Oh, wow. Can I touch your hair? Most witches don't have princess hair. I bet it smells like cake. I love cake."

Sophie: "I'm not a witch!"

(Feig, 2022, 00:18:52)

Good's *consent* is also reflected in the Ever students' unquestioning adherence to their curriculum. When Professor Anemone teaches that smiling is a Good woman's primary weapon, the students simply accept it as absolute truth. Only Agatha struggles to smile as instructed, to the point that Beatrix says she does not feel safe when she sees Agatha's stiff smile and then laughs at her failure. In contrast, Chinen, another Good student, answers questions about school rules with a dead-on memorization that demonstrates the doctrine has reached a level of perfection:

Chinen: "Good can only defend. If Good were to attack first, by definition, it would be no longer Good."

(Feig, 2022, 01:07:30)

On the Evil side, consent operates through a similar pattern but in the opposite direction. The Nevers students proudly and willingly accept their villain identities. Anadil, for example, proudly acknowledges his evil and demonstrates the evil power he possesses:

Anadil: "You want to get out of here, princess? This raving lunatic's unique would be more than happy to get rid of you permanently."

(Feig, 2022, 01:02:30)

Dot and Anadil introduce themselves with pride in their villain lineage. Therefore, when Sophie refuses to drink a potion that would make her look ugly, exclaiming, "I don't want to be ugly. It's not who I am," the Nevers students laugh at her. For them, being 'ugly and powerful' is an ideal identity worth embracing, not something to be avoided. This phenomenon is clear evidence of the power of consent: none of the Nevers students were bullied into becoming villains—they desired, planned, and prided themselves on the role. This pattern is precisely the same as the Evers students, who do not need to be pressured into being feminine and submissive.

These quotes demonstrate that both schools produce subjects who have internalized the logic of the system so deeply that they are able to reproduce it without direction, without coercion, and without awareness of doing so. In other words, the hegemony in this film is not sustained by threats or violence, but rather by the subjects' voluntary acceptance, maintenance, and dissemination of the principles that underpin the system.

Counter-Hegemony

The potential for counter-hegemony in this film moves along two fundamentally different paths, both in terms of its rationale and capacity. Based on Gramsci's theory (1971), true *counter-hegemony* requires an organized collective movement through a war of position—not merely individual resistance, or simply the exchange of one form of domination for another.

The first path is demonstrated by Agatha, who instinctively rejects the legitimacy of the system from the outset. Agatha's resistance initially seems more like an attempt to distance herself from the system than to directly challenge it. Unlike almost every other character in the film who is obsessed with whether they are placed in the correct category, Agatha is the only one who seems unconcerned about those categories.

Agatha: "How do I get over to that school?"

Beatrix: "I knew from its smell. It's a Never."

Agatha: "Just listen! I just need to find my friend."

(Feig, 2022, 00:20:30)

Agatha: "Yes, but something very bad is going on here... We have to get out now, kiss or no kiss."

(Feig, 2022, 01:14:40)

This indifference is not a form of apathy, but rather a refusal to accept the system's framework of evaluation. Agatha does not seek recognition as Good; she simply wants to leave. This distinction is analytically important because her first counter-hegemonic action is not an alternative ideology, but rather a desire to escape the ideological terrain itself. In Gramsci's terminology, this condition cannot yet be called a war of position; rather, it is merely an individual resistance that, while important, lacks the collective dimension necessary to build a true counter-hegemony.

However, in the second half of the film, Agatha's resistance develops into something more substantive. She begins to direct her criticism not at her own position within the system, but at the underlying logic that underpins it.

Agatha: "That's what you call Good? Destroying someone kind because they can't live up to your impossible expectations? What exactly is good about that?"

Prof. Dovey: "Agatha, everyone has a role to play here. In time, you will understand."

Agatha: “No, I won’t. [softly] I told you, I don’t belong here.”

(Feig, 2022, 01:13:20)

Agatha: “Ask Dovey. And then come back and tell me how you know Evil when you see it. You know what? Try thinking for yourself for a change, and you might see past the black and white this school wants you to see. You might be surprised by what you figure out.”

(Feig, 2022, 01:17:56)

Agatha makes a subtle call to resist hegemony when Todres blatantly ignores Sophie, who is forcibly dragged away by the giant dogs. This neglect is purely due to the school’s concept—Good students only need to save princesses and defeat evil. Agatha, growing fed up, eventually brings up the incident where Tedros killed Gregor, their friend, who had transformed into a monstrous Stymph. Her anger then implicitly encourages Tedros to question the values and morals implemented within the school.

These two moments demonstrate a qualitative shift. Agatha is no longer trying to escape the system, but instead is working to build critical awareness in others. This is what Gramsci called a war of positions. Agatha works from within the institution to erode the common sense that supports the system, encouraging other students to see that the categories they have accepted as reality are actually questionable social constructs. This form of resistance is the closest thing to counter-hegemony in the film, and interestingly, it emerges not through a grand revolution or violence, but through interpersonal conversations and the gradual process of changing others’ ways of thinking.

The second path is demonstrated by Rafal, a character who offers the most extreme system-breaking approach in the film, but with motives that are the opposite of true counter-hegemony. By exploiting Sophie’s loss of faith in the Good system, Rafal uses her as a tool to take down the school. The goal is not to free students from the Good/Evil classification system, but to replace Rhian's hegemony with one’s own.

Agatha: “Rafal is using Sophie to take down the schools”

(Feig, 2022, 01:47:30)

Sophie’s Mother: “You’re gonna change the world someday.”

Rafal: “And you are special, Sophie. But they all refuse to see it. You’ve been honest, kind, patient, and did they admit you were Good? No. I’m the only one you can trust. Forget about their rules.”

(Feig, 2022, 01:19:05)

Rafal’s statement clearly contradicts reality, as the system within the school is determined by himself, disguised as the Schoolmaster. Sophie’s arrival and placement at

the School for Evil, considered a mistake, is his plan to find “true love.” He seeks to destroy both the school and its inhabitants, both Good and Evil.

Rafal: “After my brother’s death, I assumed his identity to hide my true intent. Started destroying the balance from within.”

Schoolmaster: “There are no mistakes in the School for Good and Evil.”
(Feig, 2022, 02:00:47)

This situation reflects Gramsci’s distinction between *a war of maneuver* and *a war of position*. A war of maneuver is a direct attack to seize power, while a war of position seeks to change the ideological foundations upon which that power rests. Rafal did the former without the latter. Therefore, his rebellion could not produce counter-hegemony. He had no interest in destroying the Good/Evil dichotomy; he only wanted to determine which side would prevail.

The highest point of *good sense* in this film is precisely when Sophie, who has completely sided with Evil, uses the logic of the system itself to turn the tables as the climax:

Sophie: “If Evil attacks and Good defends, then it would appear that Good has become Evil. And Evil has become Good.”

(Feig, 2022, 01:51:57)

Sophie’s statement is the most decisive deconstruction of the entire foundation of the system which implies that the categories of Good and Evil are not absolute in nature, but rather relational and dependent on the context of one’s actions. However, in Gramsci’s framework, this still cannot be called true counter-hegemony. Rafal only wants to replace the old hegemony with a new one of his own, not free everyone from the classification system itself. Moreover, Sophie only achieves this good sense after being drawn into Rafal’s project of domination, not born of an organized collective consciousness. Ultimately, the film ends with the system restored, not torn down, the system within the School for Good and Evil remains in place, but they allow both sides to befriend and mingle. This proves that no matter how much criticism of the system is raised, hegemony manages to absorb it without losing its basic structure.

Herein lies the film’s most crucial ideological moment. The ending demonstrates the hegemonic capacity for absorption or the ability to absorb criticism and reform without abandoning the underlying structures of domination. The system accepts some

criticism of itself but maintains its core foundations.

Historical and Social Context

An understanding of the ideology operating in this film cannot be separated from the socio-historical context in which it was produced and published. Gramsci (2020) emphasized that cultural texts are not born in a vacuum, but rather grow out of specific material and social conditions, and the ideology they disseminate reflects the ongoing power contestation in society. Therefore, an analysis of *The School for Good and Evil* needs to be framed within three interrelated layers of historical context: the *Fat Acceptance* movement, the development of *Body Positivity*, and Netflix's platform representation policies.

The first relevant context is the *Fat Acceptance* movement, which began in the late 1960s in the United States. This movement emerged as a response to systemic discrimination against people with overweight bodies in a society that glorified thinness as the dominant standard of beauty and health. Robinson (2014) notes that protests from this movement later sparked the formation of the *National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance* (NAAFA) in 1969, with the goal of ending weight-based discrimination. More than just an aesthetic issue, this movement strongly opposed the view that fat is synonymous with disease and that dieting is a universal solution. This rejection then made the wider public aware that ideal body standards are not natural truths, but rather questionable cultural constructs.

Furthermore, entering the era of social media, resistance to these beauty standards developed into the Body Positivity movement which began to resonate widely in 2012. This movement expanded the scope of its criticism beyond mere physical conditions, including issues of skin color, gender, and disability as part of the resistance to oppressive social physical standards. Leboeuf (2019) explains that *Body Positivity* aims to foster a positive emotional relationship between individuals and their own bodies, which is manifested through acceptance of the appearance, abilities, and experiences that the body provides. Within a Gramscian framework, this phenomenon represents *a war of position* taking place within digital *civil society*. The goal is to reclaim the narrative about the body and beauty from the hegemony that has so far set a single standard as universal.

Moreover, by the time the film was released in 2022, the social context of openness and diversity had become increasingly prevalent in the global entertainment

industry, including within the editorial policies of the Netflix platform. A study by Asmar et al. (2023) shows that between 2020 and 2022, Netflix actively built its brand as a pro-diversity platform through the representation of diverse identities and social experiences. Within this framework, *The School for Good and Evil* can be analyzed as a product of this trend which suggest that this film is influenced by the growing public attention to the representation of women, critiques of beauty standards, and the acceptance of different identities in popular media.

These three layers of context are closely related to the *hegemony* found in the film. The *Fat Acceptance* and *Body Positivity* movements prove that the physical standard of “beautiful = Good,” “ugly = Evil” — considered *common sense* at the school — is a cultural construct that has long been criticized in the real world, although it has not completely collapsed. The fact that the film continues to rely on this old-fashioned standard as its foundational logic reflects how strongly this aesthetic hegemony persists despite continued questioning. On the other hand, Netflix’s diversity policy explains why the protests in the film never developed into a total transformation: the industry that produced the film benefits from a narrative that critiques the system, but they stand to lose if the story destroys the system. Thus, the hegemony in the film is not only at work within the storyline, but is evident in the historical and industrial conditions surrounding its production.

CONCLUSION

The School for Good and Evil ultimately reveals something more disturbing than a simple tale of good and evil. The film shows how deeply a classification system can shape the identities of those it governs, to the point that its subjects not only accept but actively desire their own categorization. Through a Gramscian lens, what appears to be a tale of moral reversal is a portrait of how hegemony reproduces itself. It operates not through walls, guards, and violence, but through curriculum, aesthetic standards, and the psychological need to feel accepted within a group. The most enduring prison, as the film demonstrates, is one whose inmates have forgotten they are imprisoned and no longer feel the need to be released.

The film’s most important contribution, and its most significant limitation, lies in the extent to which it follows through on its own critique. On the one hand, the film

successfully presents a genuine critique of the Good/Evil binary through Agatha's rejection of the system's requirements and Sophie's eventual realization. On the other hand, the critique never reaches its conclusion. Ultimately, the school system remains in place, albeit with some leniency. This situation can be understood not merely as a weakness in the story, but rather as a reflection of the interests of the industry that produces it. As a commercial platform, Netflix can support narratives that criticize the system, but not to the point of completely undermining it, because that's precisely where its selling point lies.

The deeper question this study opens up is not whether popular films can challenge hegemony, but under what conditions such a challenge can become more than a mere absorbed critique. Gramsci warned that true counter-hegemony requires an organized collective consciousness, not just a single subverting text. Film can open up new perspectives, but it cannot, alone, overthrow entrenched common sense. At its most optimal, film can function as a medium that fosters critical awareness, thus opening up space for collective questioning of the existing order. The moment when Agatha encourages Tedros to think for himself is not a revolutionary act, but a starting point. Whether that starting point develops into something greater depends on conditions beyond the text itself.

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