The Pedagogy of the Power and Influence of Film for Mexican-American Students in Today's Political Climate: A Case of the Discursive Construction of Extremist Ideologies on “Fixing” the Urban School “Problem”

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Abstract
Many of today’s films are a blending of fiction and reality that present a problem of (mis)representation of Mexican-descent students in urban school settings. When the images of people of color are intertwined with ideological discourse and text in the film that further stereotypes or stigmatizes their community, it offers little glimpse into the other realities that overwhelmingly represent who such people really are and the struggles they endure. One especially egregious and dangerous public pedagogical practice that occurs through film is the intermingling of the reality/ies of urban schools and students of color with extremist ideologies in fictitious story plots. I argue that in today’s anti-Mexican climate, we must look closely at the extremist ideologies that exist in many of today’s films that contribute to the undercurrent pedagogy that is dominating the current discourse that influences how the mainstream think and react to people of Mexican-descent.

Introduction
I recently asked my first-year university students, “What are some things in society that can teach you something about the world, and you may not even be aware that it is teaching you something?” One student answered, and the others in class nodded in agreement, “movies.” In today’s multi-media, high-tech, visually-stimulated society, we cannot ignore the powerful pedagogical force and influence that is film (Giroux, 2002; hooks, 1996; Spring, 1992). Many of today’s films are a blending of fiction and reality that present a problem of (mis)representation of people of color in U.S. society. The danger is that movies “give the re-imagined, reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of the real” (hooks, 1996, p. 1). Thus, when the images of people of color are intertwined with ideological discourse and text in the film that further stereotypes or stigmatizes their community, it offers little glimpse into the other realities that overwhelmingly represent who such people are and the struggles they endure.

One especially egregious and dangerous public pedagogical practice that occurs through film is the intermingling of the reality/ies of urban schools and students of color with extremist ideologies in fictitious story plots. That is, there are movies like 187, a film about an ambitious high school teacher who is victimized by some of his students who are members of gangs. The movie focuses on depicting marginalized, urban youth of color
as extremely violent, “menaces to society,” with the “solution” being relayed by the film to jail or eliminate them completely from the equation. I contend that in today’s climate of Minutemen “monitoring the borders” with Mexico in today’s anti-Mexican immigrant, anti-bilingual, English-only political, cultural and educational atmosphere, students of Mexican-descent are especially vulnerable to the undercurrent pedagogy that is dominating the current discourse and dialogue that influences how the mainstream think and react to people of Mexican-descent. Undercurrent pedagogy is a subtle but elusive social (re)construction of the knowledge of the lives of people, events, communities, cultures, and the like disseminated through media, news, movies, and everyday discourse interactions and the potential it has in influencing the way(s) in which we think and act toward such ideas depicted. The news media is especially notorious for presenting all the “negative” that occurs in urban schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) with a majority of students of color, capitalizing on the fears of white, middle-class America that this educational disintegration could perhaps reach their children’s school (Giroux, 2000).

Undercurrent pedagogy is a pedagogy that we may not even know is occurring, but exists behind what we consume in everyday life in an often docile, unassuming, and subconscious level and “teaching” about the world around us. I argue that this pedagogy is present in the ideas and ideologies of media and film, which educators and their students of color must recognize and utilize to deconstruct notions of (mis)representations of identity and notions of the multiple realities that exist in urban school settings and their communities. In today’s current anti-Mexican climate, it is especially crucial to involve students of Mexican-descent in a dissection and dialogue of the text presented in today’s films that contain characters that supposedly represent them.

The purpose of this paper is to present an argument on the powerful public pedagogical influence of films like 187, and the dangers of the discursive construction of “extremist” ideologies that stigmatize and stereotype students of Mexican-descent in urban school settings. I contend that such films contribute to already present ideologies and views on the radical practice of containment, abandonment or elimination of at-risk and anti-social students of color, ignoring grander issues of educational problems in urban schools, denying any room for more creative, effective and aggressive measures to address the needs of all students of color in urban schools.

In this paper, I first briefly discuss the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis and then review literature on analyzing film and the power of the influence of film. I then outline the story and characters of the movie 187 along with an analysis of particular clips that discursively construct ideologies that provide extremist and violent notions of eliminating Mexican-descent gang members from the school system. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on how educators of Mexican-American students can use such (mis)representations of their students to initiate dialogue and critical deconstruction of such a text.

**Critical Discourse Analysis of Film**

My analysis is grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is useful in providing a starting point to think and theorize about various social and discursive phenomena
on multiple levels in film. Fairclough (1995) finds that when examining the language of media, it should be analyzed as a discourse. This film is a text that contains particular textual, semiotic, and discursive practices that intertwine to produce a public discourse and pedagogy with social, political, and educational implications in the ideologies being relayed to movie-viewing audiences. In this sense, CDA is helpful because it considers how social processes encompass language dynamics. It provides a way to look closely at the multi-layered complexity that film is and how its texts, discourses, and semiotics function within social processes. This type of analysis is “critical in the sense that it aims to show non-obvious ways in which language is involved in social relations of power and domination, and in ideology” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229). The focal text that I analyze is the film 187. I refer to CDA and its underlying assumptions to guide my choices for methodology in the analysis of the movie. I selectively transcribed various clips of the film 187. I used transcriptions of the film as well as the visual texts/images as the data for my analysis. The duration of 187 is 119 minutes and was released in 1997.

**Review of Literature**

**Analyzing Film**

In critical discourse analysis, analyzing film is seen as one of many sources that can provide the “public discourse in which everyday conversations are coherently embedded” (van Dijk, 1987, p. 4). Van Dijk (1987) acknowledges, though, that much of the analysis done on film is done by those in mass media, film, literature, with little systematic insight looking at the precise structures and functions of prejudice discourse that may exist. In discussing the need for analysis of film that is potentially damaging to culturally and/or linguistically different groups, (Giroux 2000) argues that “as public discourses, these cultural texts can be addressed in terms of how they are constituted as objects that gain their relevance through their relationship to other social institutions, resources, and nondiscursive practices” (p. 81). Lemke (1995) builds on this discussion of the impact of public discourse, providing that it has a powerful way of weaving its way through the communication and talk of those that read the multiple texts that are presented by various media forms. He finds that “the role of discourse in society is active; it not only re-confirms and re-enacts existing social relationships and patterns of behavior, it also renegotiates social relationships and introduces new meanings and new behaviors” (Lemke, 1995, p. 2).

The media and film are forms of text that reflect glimpses into the lives of others in the broader social community, where texts are produced and reproduced and “reconstruct the ethnic attitudes and discourses of social members and groups” (van Dijk, 1987, p. 40). As a discursive medium, it has an important role in the studies of the social and getting a feel of the pulse of the dynamic structures of society (Parker & Bolton Discourse Network, 1999). The semiotic and discursive constructions in film contain layers and intersections of multiple social, linguistic and communicative dynamics that must be peeled away in order to reveal the underlying power structures that invest so much into producing a particular text. If power structures in and beneath films can have an influence on the social consciousness, a critical approach to the content, structure and presentation of the film
must be taken so that we can all be more than passive viewers to what most perceive to be simple and harmless entertainment.

Media Influence

Parenti (1992) argues that people are greatly impacted by social forces that they cannot even perceive, including the mass media. He contends that the way people perceive other groups is heavily influenced by how the news and movies portray those groups, essentially inventing various realities of peoples and their situations. Parenti (1990) argues that “even if supposedly not political in intent, the entertainment industry has been political in its impact, discouraging critical perceptions of our social order while planting pictures in our heads that have been supportive of a number of social and ideological views, including racial stereotypes” (p. 18). Fairclough (1995) finds that the power of the media goes beyond presenting information, but in how they selectively represent the world is where there is a wider social impact. The presenting of information also deals with the types of social identities, that is, the many versions of self and others they project and the cultural values these encompass within the films.

Film, especially, has played a crucial and fundamental role in creating and denigrating the identities of racial minorities. Looking at issues of race is particularly important in this analysis of 187 because of the overwhelming number of students of color in the urban school setting of this film, as in reality, where today’s urban schools often are populated by Latinos and African-Americans. This has also been the case with a number of other films that have also presented minority students in deplorable school situations, such as Stand and Deliver, The Substitute, and Dangerous Minds, among others. Although some of these films present situations of the resilience of students of color, larger social issues transcend such films, such as issues of power, privilege and inequitable school funding. Like 187, these films function as a “commodity by promoting the social, economic, and political interests of the dominant group through the representations of Others” (Chaisson, 2000, p. 2). Representations of different ethnic groups are often reflective of the cultural beliefs held and cultivated by a society. The beliefs and ideas about racial groups, in turn, are reinforced by the cultural representations found in the news media and film (Omi and Winant, 1994).

Many researchers have found that as mass consumers of images, texts, and language, we do not keep our store of media imagery distinct and separate from our store of real-world imagery (Parenti, 1992; Weimann, 2000). Young (1996) asserts that “notions of truth and reality may become established in society through being constantly reiterated and eventually naturalized through ideology and discourse” in the media (p. 36). Parenti (1992) finds that the power of media and film lies within the ability to attach certain meanings to images and circulate them in mass amounts to readers or consumers of those textual images. He argues that in the case of film, these images become fixed in the social consciousness because of the recurring manner in which they are portrayed, in so many similar contexts, styles and situations. Here “power is integral to a discourse on the notions of identity and representations” (p. 1).
Ramírez-Berg (1997) finds that “stereotyping in films slips effortlessly into the existing hegemony, the subtle, naturalizing way the ruling class maintains its dominance over subordinate groups. Viewed as a tool of the dominant ideology, the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes in the movies and in the media function to maintain the status quo by representing dominant groups as ‘naturally’ empowered and marginal groups as disenfranchised” (p. 111). He also notes that “the analysis of ethnic stereotypes in Hollywood cinema offers the critic a potentially powerful tool for exposing the workings of a film apparatus that persists in creating exclusionary images of the Other – and of the socioeconomic system of which it is a part” (Ramírez-Berg, 1997, p. 112). Parenti (1992) also contends that audiences usually do some perceptual editing, projecting something of their own viewpoint upon what they see. But this editing itself is partly conditioned by the previously internalized images fed to us by the same media we are now viewing. In other words, rather than being rationally critical of the images and ideologies of the entertainment media, our minds – after prolonged exposure to earlier programs and films – sometimes become active accomplices in our own indoctrination (p. 5-6).

News and other media, in their usual negative portrayal of urban schooling, act as a strong historical backdrop to the perceptions and ideologies that movie audiences have of urban schooling when going to view films such as 187. The film then reinforces what they already perceive to be real because it was viewed or read on a medium that is typically viewed as a truth-telling device on what occurs in the real world, leaving little room to question the ideological messages that are suggestive in films where the setting is realistic. For this reason, I look at a particular discourse in the film 187 because of its extreme ideological implications in “fixing” the urban school “problem” and the students that cause such “problems.”

The Film 187

The story in the film 187 is centrally based in an urban school, where students of color are shown plaguing the schools with drugs, violence and academic apathy, while other students are passive and disempowered observers of this anti-social and anti-school behavior. 187 is a movie about Trevor Garfield, a once idealistic African-American teacher returning as a substitute to an East Los Angeles school with a majority of Latino students. He had been stabbed fifteen months prior by a student in his former school in the Bronx, still in the process of recovery but with a natural desire and passion to teach. He finds himself becoming more disillusioned with the educational system and how it handles “problem students,” eventually causing him to resort to violence in order to rid the schools of such students.

The Antagonists

The antagonists of the film, Latino gang members who are shown as extremely violent, murderous individuals, are constructed in a way that allows their interactions and history with the protagonist of the film, Trevor Garfield, to provide a unique backdrop to the extremist talk produced by Garfield and another teacher Dave Childress. The gang members represent the extreme to which violence and unruliness has overcome many
urban schools. As the focal point of the film, the gang members provide the message that disrespect for authority and education is rampant in urban schools because of such students, which is interfering with the work and efforts by others who are trying to do their job as students and educators.

When viewers see “the repeatable, culturally and historically specific actions” (Lemke, 1995) of the gang members throughout the film, it provides the context in which other actions and discourse are produced. In the context of the violent and anti-social behavior by the gang members in the film, the extremist talk and behavior on the part of the teachers is essentially neutralized and justified. That is, the viewers are led to believe that such extremist talk and action are necessary in light of the situation with such students in this school setting. The audience is only left to empathize with the protagonists. Many more will tend to relate to the teachers in the film, the “good guys,” ones who go to great lengths to educate and serve the school in which they work, but who also practice extreme forms of talk and eventually violence. The manner in which the image and message of the gang members is constructed throughout the film provides room for the extremist talk of the teachers to occur in an ideological space that carries as much weight, if not more, than that of the gang members. However, the different social positions of the gang members and the teachers place a certain value on the ideologies expressed in the film. That of the teachers obviously carries more weight.

_extremist talk in film: an analysis of 187_

The movie 187 offers a bleak look at the situation of urban schools today, mostly attended by Latino and Black students. Latino gang members are the antagonists of the film, taunting other students, vandalizing school and public property, and harassing teachers and their homes and pets. It provides a story of the sad and unfortunate conditions that some of the worst urban schools are in today, addressing the bureaucracy of schools, teacher burn-out, student apathy, and anti-social behavior of some students. Yet, this film is limiting in its exposure of urban schools in that it only depicts a small part of the complete picture of the multiple realities that exist in such settings.

The story turns into one of extreme measures taken by one teacher, Trevor Garfield, who eventually murders a Mexican-American gang-member and cuts the finger off another when he feels that the “system” cannot control and discipline the anti-social students who disrupt the educational system for everyone. Within the film, there is talk and events enacted by two teachers, in particular, who discursively represent extreme views in dealing with disruptive students in schools. There is another scene where another teacher confronts Garfield when she is suspicious about his behavior.

This first clip for analysis takes place in the teachers’ lunchroom, where the burnt-out, alcoholic History teacher, Dave Childress, has a conversation with Trevor Garfield about handling students and how the “system” works at the school. Childress eventually finds out that Garfield was stabbed by a former student. Garfield informs Childress that the authorities had only sent the student to a juvenile facility until he turned twenty-one. Childress reacts in a disgusted manner and says that they “shoulda caned the little bastard.” He continues by reciting what a dictator of a Far East country suggested, saying “when a
continuing state of defiance and disorder cannot be checked by the rules, then new and sometimes drastic rules must be forged to maintain order. The alternative is anarchy.”

This first segment of talk that I highlight here begins to formulate extremist views expressed by Childress. It is the beginning of an extremist ideology that comes to fruition in the form of Garfield killing one student and mutilating another. What is ironic here is that Childress actually verbally and physically expresses his extremist views in the next two segments, but Garfield is the one in the film who actually enacts such views. Childress and Garfield represent two sides to one extremist entity, one side that talks and expresses desires to commit crimes against students, and the other that actually puts them to action.

Childress shows his dissatisfaction with the current state of society and the criminal justice system in place that deals with violent students. He offers a specific form of punishment, caning, which suggests that he has thought about the manner in which our schools and society discipline and/or punish unruly or violent youth. In addition to expressing some sense of sympathy toward Garfield’s experience, Childress reflects through those early words his own personal experience in teaching at that school and the state of the school itself. One earlier scene shows that Childress stores a gun in his desk drawer of his classroom, alluding to a history of his bitter and hostile attitude toward his students as well as the school system. His gun in the drawer symbolizes protection against the defiance, but also a tool for personal stability in a place where he feels that there is no control or order, because the rules have obviously not worked for him.

His talk begins to take an extremist bent when he says that “new and sometimes drastic rules must be forged to maintain order.” When he uses “drastic,” there is no context to provide that he was speaking of a type of reform that calls for debates, discussion, and gradual change for the rules already in place. His use of “drastic” here provides a sense of urgency and immediacy in the changing of the rules to curb anti-social behavior, especially since the only other alternative is “anarchy.” Placing this talk in context with the “caning” example shows his support of a type of corporal punishment, one that involves hurting other students.

This talk by Childress reveals a starting point for expressing extremist ideology in the film. Although corporal punishment was once a common practice in the U. S., as it still may be in some schools today, it symbolizes a frustration with today’s tactics in dealing with issues of student discipline in his school. Childress reciting a philosophy of someone from a different country, a different part of the world, a different culture represents his desire to adopt a new world order, one that fits his own philosophy, something completely foreign to the school culture in which he works and must tolerate. He cannot even relate to other educators or philosophers in a more localized way. Childress has adopted the views of a dictator, one who has (or at least the illusion of) total control of that which is in his reach, something desired by Childress for the school as well as his own classroom. This teacher has reached a point where his thinking within the system is no longer feasible if appropriate steps are to be taken to address the problems of anti-social and unruly student behavior. The teacher sensing and expressing the urge to resort to action that is not within the “system” that has ultimately helped to create the current state in which the schools are in. This turning point begins the journey into deeper thoughts and expression of extremist talk.
As the movie progresses, one Mexican-American student, who is a known gang-member, murderer, harasser of teachers, Benny Chacon, comes up missing. Garfield’s classroom then gets trashed by the remaining three members of the gang but he cannot prove that they did it. So Garfield one night cuts the finger off another one of the gang members while he is drugged up and passed out. The school board has a meeting about the incidents, which Garfield and Childress attend together, afterwards going to Childress’ home. In his garage, while intoxicated, Childress shows off his collection of guns to Garfield while he sits and observes and listens to his babbling. However, Childress soon begins to display disturbing and violent tendencies toward fictional students in front of Garfield. He takes a drink of his beer, points the gun at the middle of the garage, and says the following, pretending to talk to a student and then shooting him with the gun:

34     mmm You know José,
35     I told you once, I told you a
36     hundred times, STAY IN YOUR COTTON
37     PICKIN’ SEAT BOY BOOM
38     .hhh boom (laugh) Oh man, don’t tell
39     me you never wanted to blow one of these
40     little bastards away
41     (silence, approx. 10 secs.)

This portion of talk represents the next stage of the formation and expression of extremist ideologies by Childress again. It is framed within an imaginary situation where Childress is disciplining a student, José, in his classroom, a situation that he apparently has to deal with quite frequently (line 36). He is using an individual’s name in this situation, but it seems to reflect his general attitude toward unruly students and his fantasizing about using violence to treat this problem of anti-social behavior in the classroom and school, shown by his asking Garfield “Don’t tell me you never wanted to blow one of these little bastards away” (lines 38-40). Although only simulating the act with his drunkenness trying to dilute the severity of the ideas, Childress actually “shoots” his gun at the student (line 37) and then proceeds to laugh at the situation.

Childress here actually resorts to his own imaginary acting and talking of committing violence against a student, thinking that he can relate to Garfield and his pain and his experience. Garfield, however, expresses his disapproval of Childress’ actions later, which is ironic because Garfield has already actually killed one gang member and mutilated another, part of the drama and suspense of the film. Childress here represents a descent to another level of desire to commit extreme acts against students in order to create a world of order. His threatening to shoot a student because they do not sit down playfully but disturbingly represents a deep-seated frustration with the actions of students in his classroom. Not only does he actually pretend to point the gun at the imaginary student, he actually shoots him, which shows a desire for elimination or removal of that which has caused him to repeatedly (“a hundred times” – line 36) deal with similar situations of behavior and discipline in the classroom.
This talk and action represents an extremist ideology of dealing with students of color “beyond rehabilitation,” resorting to the ultimate in dealing with situations that seem out of control, getting rid of that which creates the problems. Childress here only represents that desire to commit such acts, while Garfield later embodies the actual fulfillment of extremist acts in dealing with problem students. This discursive and semiotic construction provides a message that reflects what Garfield actually feels and is experiencing, but is in no position to express it because of his desire to continue to be a model teacher to students who may value his presence in the school and classroom. Childress’ present talk and actions represent what Garfield has already done, eliminate that which prevents him from being the teacher that he wants to be and having the classroom and school environment that allows this.

Near the end of the film, Ellen Henry, a computer teacher at the school and colleague and friend of Garfield, begins to get suspicious of Garfield’s actions when she discovers a black rosary in his desk drawer, which she believes used to be that of Benny Chacon. She goes to Garfield’s home, tells him what she knows about Benny’s death. Garfield reacts in a way that further strengthens her suspicion about whether he had anything to do with Benny’s murder and the incident with Cesar, another gang member.

35  G:  hhh  I I admire you Ellen.  Like you, I
36     used to think the world was this great
37     place where everybody lived by the same
38     standard I did.  Then some kid with a
39     nail showed me I was living in his world.
40     A world where chaos rules, not order.  A
41     world where righteousness is not
42     rewarded.  That’s Cesar’s world.  And if
43     you’re not willing to play by his rules,
44     you’re gonna have to pay the price.
45  H:  I don’t know you.  I don’t know who you
46     are.  I DON’T KNOW YOU.
47  G:  ((You do know me I’m a teacher.  Just
48     like you.))

It is at this point that Garfield rationalizes his actions to Ellen, which he sees as normalized in relation to what students like Benny and Cesar have done to the school as well as their lives. This speech here by Garfield goes full circle to the first talk that Childress has with Garfield about appropriating new rules in order to prevent disorder. He now fully encompasses what Childress expressed and pretended to do with his problem students.

When he says “if you’re not willing to play by his rules, you’re gonna have to pay the price” (lines 42-44), he is referring to the violent world that such students have created, where only violence can effectively fight and win against this violence. He expresses his belief that it takes extreme measures to protect that which he values most - his job, friends and education. Garfield also begins to place the gang members in the form of pathologic
“other” in another “world” (line 42), creating a distinction between himself and that which has created the chaos in this world so to normalize and justify his position and actions. Another indication of extremist philosophy expressed by Garfield is that which indicates that the world is no longer accepting of idealism (lines 35-38) and that aggressive action and/or violence must be used in order to create what once provided for a normal, natural order of society.

Garfield’s talk here represents a form of extremism that is normalized because of the backdrop that the violent students provide in the film. His speech here is a plea to understand his position as a teacher in an urban school, where certain actions must be taken in order to provide places of learning and comfort for the majority. This is his attempt to provide that if something does not get done to address the problem of students destroying what “peaceful people” like himself desire, then all will be destroyed.

**Conclusion**

This paper sought to show how certain elements of film can function to relay or suggest ideas, ideologies, and images that may influence the social consciousness and the perception of students of color and their role(s) in urban school systems. It is crucial to look at the potential for film to contribute to grander ideologies and attitudes toward “fixing” the urban school problem. Films like *187* provide a rationalization for today’s policies of building more prisons to fix the crime rate, rather than promoting the positive impacts of education and providing more funding to schools that are in desperate need of it. When the mainstream sees Latino gang issues in schools in the news, such is only reinforced and often exacerbated by popular films like, creating the dangerous dynamic of intermingling fiction with reality.

This analysis was done to create a space for thinking on such issues. It is a place where students of Mexican-descent can begin to consider the power of film and media and how they function in a grander social process and discourse about schooling, and in particular the nature of urban schools where a large percentage of the student population is of Latino or Mexican-descent. They may be guided to ask How does such a representation of “Mexicanness” in films like *187* influence the way(s) that society may see me inside and out of my urban school settings? Why should I be concerned about how such egregious representations of my language, culture and community are constructed in these films? When movies like *187* exist and portray such limited realities of the lives of Mexican-American students, Giroux (2002) argues that there is a necessity for progressive educators, parents, and others to engage a multicultural politics that offers students and teachers opportunities to critically examine how racialized meanings carried in varied cultural contexts such as Hollywood films gain the force of common sense, and how such texts can be examined in light of the broader assemblage of cultural pedagogies that are produced, legitimated, and circulated in a vast range of public spheres and institutionalized sites (p. 238).

Looking closer at such issues can open up potentially powerful teaching and learning opportunities for “just as society creates and consumes images and ideas about schooling, it provides teachers in return with numerous texts and artifacts to explore
with students, opening up a space for discussion about the familiar world and how it is represented in popular forms” (Farber, Provenzo, & Holm, 1994). In today’s racist climate toward peoples of Mexican-descent, this exploration and critique of film can guide students from such ethnic backgrounds to think critically of how the (mis)representation of their community, identity and culture in film is further stigmatizing and marginalizing them on a broader societal structure of power.

The students’ deconstruction of the images, discourse and ideological messages in film can represent a practice of affirmation of the strength and value in their culture, language, and self. When they critique the egregious ways that those in power have myopically presented “that which is Mexican” in urban school settings in such films, students may be empowered to resist in a critical and constructive way the public pedagogy that is presented in films like 187. Then maybe they will seek out ways to dismantle the (mis)representations that continue to stigmatize them and their culture of dreams, agency and resilience and ensure that their lives are recognized as the other lived realities that are hardly ever shown by popular film or media.
References


