

The Capitalization of Intelligence: How *Spellbound* Transforms Education into a Commodity Through Metaphor with the American Dream and the National Spelling Bee

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A documentary such as *Spellbound*, chronicling “the story of eight American children” (*Spellbound*) who competed in the 1999 Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, can initially seem trifling to most viewers. The subject material is, on the surface, so far removed from everyday experiences that they cannot be understood. As a result, the film is required to recast the National Spelling Bee and its participants in more accessible and familiar roles. *Spellbound* accomplishes this task by employing a metonymy between the National Spelling Bee and education in general, which in turn constitutes a significant component of the American Dream; through this connection path the back of the box is able to explain that “within the roller coaster ride of the National Spelling Bee can be found the heart of America” (*Spellbound*). The film substantiates this assertion through its appeals to various aspects of the American Dream; in particular, it keys in on the highly focused competition and unflagging work ethic that define the spellers’ experiences of the National Spelling Bee. These aspects serve to give meaning to the film, but they also obscure the capitalistic leanings of the American Dream and the National Spelling Bee. Nonetheless, they are prevalent in the film; by the standards of the spelling

bee, intelligence can be construed as a commodity, not only because it can be quantified by the breadth of one’s vocabulary but also because this vocabulary is more easily obtained as one invests more resources into expanding that vocabulary. Through the National Spelling Bee, *Spellbound* depoliticizes the educational process by strategically emphasizing the values of hard work and healthy competition, such that it overshadows any socioeconomic factors that might influence a child’s education.

On some level, it is curious to suggest that the National Spelling Bee, which can be construed as a test for the breadth of vocabulary rather than depth of perception, could represent education in its entirety. Yet, unlike most other foundations of primary and secondary education, this particular subject has been the object of sentimentalization, described by Joan Didion in “Sentimental Journeys”, which grants symbolic significance and authority to a few discrete and possibly insignificant events: “The imposition of a sentimental, or false, narrative on ... disparate and random experience ... means, necessarily, that much of what happens ... will be rendered merely as illustrative, a series of set pieces, or performance opportunities” (259). More specifically, sentimental narratives rely on metaphor and metonymy to reduce complex events into terms consistent with its “set pieces” (249). Eubanks, in his essay “Poetics and Narrativity: How Texts Tell Stories”, notes that this has the effect of reading new meaning into a metaphor’s constituent elements: “Metaphors, far from merely making use of obvious, preexistent similarities, emphasize some similarities and ignore others; they also suggest similarities that would not be apparent without the metaphor” (43).

Spellbound makes extensive use of metaphor and metonymy in making sense of the spellers’ experiences. Two such examples, one nested within another, form the principal

framework of the film. The first of these is the metaphor and metonymy Spelling is/for Education, which can be sentimentalized so that it can be taken to embody the full process of education. This is especially true with relation to the subjects of reading and writing; Alex Cameron, who pronounced the words for the spellers in the National Spelling Bee, notes with a measure of critical distance that spelling has often been associated with the beginning of these subjects, even though it is, in itself, a “fairly mechanical process” (*Spellbound*). On multiple occasions, the spellers are described as intelligent – “she’s smart” (*Spellbound*), “he’s that intelligent” (*Spellbound*) – making an implicit correlation between the spellers’ talents and the breadth of their knowledge. At the same time, *Spellbound* makes use of the American Dream narrative trope. In the film, education, already sentimentalized such that it can be equated with spelling and the National Spelling Bee, is an integral component of the American Dream. One such declaration comes from the speller Angela’s family, who immigrated to America from Mexico and whose father speaks only Spanish. Her brother, Jorge, explains that they made the move because “they thought we would have better educational opportunities” (*Spellbound*). In this light, Angela’s qualification for the National Spelling Bee indicates that the hardships associated with starting a new life have been “worth it” (*Spellbound*). For these people the educational promise of the American Dream has been fulfilled through the National Spelling Bee, a connection that immediately follows from the nested metaphor of Spelling is Education is American Dream.

This metaphor is particularly interesting, as the National Spelling Bee and the American Dream share a number of significant features, which work in tandem to give new meaning to education. One such feature is the highly competitive atmosphere in the National Spelling Bee.

Spellbound handles this aspect carefully to avoid any ambiguities about its positive effects. Most notably, one of the prospective spellers, Cody, was not present in the main film and appears only as a bonus feature. His presence would, perhaps, complicate the aspect of competition in the National Spelling Bee and the American Dream, as evidenced by his statement, spoken with a potentially uncomfortable level of conviction: “Competition is what made this world great” (*Spellbound*), and by his great distress at missing his first word at the National Spelling Bee. This narrative becomes marginalized in the main body of the film, the loser of what Crenshaw, in “Whose Story is it Anyway?”, calls “the contestation between the many narrative structures through which reality might be perceived and talked about” (157). Perhaps this is not surprising, as any suggestion of unhealthy or obsessive competition, however slight, would be out of place in the context of *Spellbound* and of the American Dream rhetoric. This allows for a defense of the intense competition of the National Spelling Bee.

Instead, *Spellbound* softens these sentiments so that they seem entirely natural and beneficial to the experience. One of the most subtle instances of this idea of healthy competition comes through in the numerous ESPN broadcasts in the film, one of which features analyses of championship favorites based, for instance, on their understanding of foreign etymologies (*Spellbound*). This transforms the National Spelling Bee, a very tense affair as indicated by the opening scene, into something similar to a sports event, fitting with the statement on the back of the box: “the Bee is as intense a competition as any Olympic match, and for the spellers and their families, the stakes are just as high” (*Spellbound*). Likewise, the spellers presented in the film invariably demonstrate good sportsmanship, applauding all spellers even when they miss their words, and losing with grace and pride – “I already feel like a champion” (*Spellbound*).

Indeed, some of the spellers find a silver lining in their loss, as Angela does in saying, “I kind of feel relieved” (*Spellbound*) that she does not need to study for the National Spelling Bee anymore. For these spellers, according to the documentary, this healthy competition, common both to the National Spelling Bee and to the American Dream, enhances their experiences.

Underpinning this competitive atmosphere is a very strong and arguably grueling work ethic. The speller Neil’s father, Rajesh, expresses this connection in a very concise manner: “What is valuable in life that’s easy to achieve? Nothing” (*Spellbound*). As with the competitive spirit of the National Spelling Bee, there is a possible counter narrative, which is briefly and indirectly exposed by the speller Emily’s mother, Suzanne, that claims that having a child study for the National Spelling Bee to the exclusion of many other activities constitutes “a different form of child abuse” (*Spellbound*). Yet, as with the obsessive competition counter narrative, this narrative is overwhelmed by the sheer volume of praise for the spellers’ work ethic. Again, this is buttressed by the rhetoric of the American Dream: Rajesh points to the “guarantee, if you work hard enough you can make it” (*Spellbound*). Especially interesting is how well this fits with a narrative trope regarding Indian children, a category under which Neil falls; according to the schoolteacher Ms. Whitehurst, “I know that they’re going to have a great work ethic” (*Spellbound*). There is an overarching sense of an “immigrant work ethic” (*Spellbound*) in the film, even though it is left tacit in the film and appears only in the additional features of the documentary. This sort of work ethic fits the National Spelling Bee very well, as evidenced by the countless images of the spellers studying, perhaps, in April’s case, up to eight or nine hours in the summer (*Spellbound*), the equivalent of a full time job. It is

necessary, as well, because spellers have a chance for the championship only if they spell every word they receive perfectly, however obscure or disorienting they may be – “one letter and your out” (*Spellbound*). This work ethic, then, is prevalent in the National Spelling Bee and in the *Spellbound* version of education.

These two similarities in the National-Spelling-Bee-is-Education-is-American-Dream metaphor permeate the documentary and receive a large measure of its attention. This is not the case for another connection that originates in the American Dream but can be extended in a logical fashion to the National Spelling Bee; specifically, the capitalistic leanings of the American Dream are deemphasized in *Spellbound*. This is accomplished through a variety of methods. One of these rests in the selection of the eight spellers followed in the film. Together, they constitute a diverse mosaic of people, in terms of ethnicity, region, and background, among other things, including two Indian people and a black woman and only two white men. This is certainly in keeping with the promise of the American Dream that “people accept them for who they are” (*Spellbound*). The film then emphasizes their common ground, how they are united by their spelling talents and by their unflagging work ethic and competitive spirit. A closer look at their study resources, however, suggests that there are some differences that can affect the spellers’ performances in the National Spelling Bee. Specifically, the Indian spellers, Nupur and Neil, had access to extensive computer resources for more efficient study. Neil also had a great deal of support of his father Rajesh, who worked through words with him, as many as 8000 in the final days (*Spellbound*). This makes it more plausible that they should finish with relatively high placements; Nupur was the winner of the 1999 National Spelling Bee, and Neil placed 9th out of 249 spellers. It is not

unreasonable to suspect that their superior resources gave them an advantage over some of the other spellers featured in the documentary, but this angle is not explored. Nevertheless, the fact remains such resources, especially since they cost more and demand more spare time than traditional methods based on an unabridged dictionary and a strong discipline. This more efficient study can translate directly to an increase in the mass of memorized words and facilitate the development of an awareness of general rules to spell unknown words. Due to the nature of the National Spelling Bee, those who have access to more efficient and more costly methods of study are more likely to win than those who have relied more solely on their raw talents. It is preferable, then, to cultivate these talents through whatever investments are within the means of the speller. In this sense, the National Spelling Bee is at least partially a capitalistic institution.

By the National Spelling Bee/ Education/ American Dream metaphor, this implies that education has capitalistic influences, where superior resources can translate to a superior education. Yet, while *Spellbound* embraces a number of the constituent elements of capitalistic culture, extolling the virtues of hard work and healthy competition, it refuses to synthesize these elements into the whole. Perhaps the filmmakers perceived this effect to be too real in application to education, where it is well noted that superior resources and wealth do indeed promise a higher quality education than afforded by public schools alone. This runs directly counter to the promise of equality that is the core of the American Dream, and it points to a significant disconnect between its various promises. It is difficult to embrace equal opportunity when this opportunity is predicated on having the resources to invest in seizing it and its returns.

Works Cited

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