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# Popular Film as an Instructional Strategy in Qualitative Research Methods Courses

Johnny Saldaña  
*Arizona State University*

The purpose of this article is to provide university instructors pedagogical applications for popular film in graduate-level qualitative research methods courses. Media instruction has a longstanding tradition in Grade K-12 classrooms, and the power of “edutainment” in our visually oriented, electronically mediated, and performative culture should not be underestimated or dismissed by university professors for their masters- and doctoral-level classrooms. Excerpts from strategically selected popular films introduce qualitative research topics, illustrate basic principles and techniques of inquiry, generate classroom discussion and reflection, clarify misunderstood constructs, function as referential mnemonics, and teach selected principles more effectively than traditional classroom pedagogy. In these film excerpts, art imitates qualitative life, and art is used to teach the science of naturalistic inquiry.

**Keywords:** *film; qualitative research; research methods; teaching*

The purpose of this article is to provide university instructors pedagogical applications for popular film in graduate-level qualitative research methods courses. The discussion does not focus on film as art form (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004), or critical or theoretical dimensions of cinema (Dick, 2005), but instead illustrates how the medium might function as an ancillary teaching and learning strategy.

## Rationale

Instructional uses of television, video, and film in the classroom have been recently and colloquially labeled *edutainment*, particularly in an era of teaching as performance (Gregory, 2007; Sarason, 1999; Tauber & Mester, 1994; Timpson, Burgoyne, Jones, & Jones, 1997). Media instruction has a

longstanding tradition in Grade K-12 classrooms, and the power of edutainment in our visually oriented, electronically mediated, and performative culture should not be underestimated or dismissed by university professors for their graduate-level classrooms.

In my instructional practice with preservice teachers, video clips from selected films, television programs, theatre productions, and commercials serve as introductory framing devices (i.e., advance organizers) for classroom discussion, concept illustration, and participatory exercises. For example, in my undergraduate multicultural education course, students view excerpts from such films as *American History X* to examine the characters' plight with racism, *In and Out* to examine homophobia, *Schindler's List* to examine antisemitism, and so on.

I originally assumed that edutainment was beyond the rigor of a graduate-level qualitative research methods seminar conducted once a week for 3 hours and filled with self-motivated doctoral students. But PhD candidates are not immune from attributes normally assigned to undergraduates: entering the classroom fatigued, expressing confusion at the introduction of abstract concepts, and yawning during lecture and discussion. Hence, like an educational action researcher (Thomas, 2005), I changed my instructional practice and, over the past decade, incorporated edutainment into my research seminar to generate enthusiasm, engage students with the content, and clarify new conceptual information.

## Contexts

My qualitative research methods course is a one-semester module for doctoral students in our theatre education program and serves as an introduction to the field of naturalistic inquiry in our discipline. (Students take additional coursework from other College of Education instructors in narrative inquiry, advanced qualitative research methods, etc.). The core textbook is Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*, accompanied by a course reading packet of selected research articles in drama education and book chapters on specialized qualitative research methods (e.g., performance ethnography, data analysis and interpretation, case studies). Enrollment ranges from three to seven graduate students annually and occasionally includes master's-level students. Major assignments include fieldwork in a public school setting, writing participant observation field notes, conducting participant interviews and transcribing them, analyzing field note and transcript data,

and composing a university Human Subjects Review Board application packet.

Visual anthropology has an impressive body of films that illustrate fieldwork in its purest sense of the word, but the majority of titles have little transferability to educational settings and contexts. And, to my knowledge, there are no instructional films available on qualitative research methods, aside from streaming video clips on the Internet as qualitative data analysis software demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the fictional and documentary formats of popular film provide ample resources for supplemental university classroom instruction. The film as art form provides a metaphor for human experience and simulates “real world” dilemmas (Dalton, 2004; Eisner, 1991). For example, the opening sequence of Morgan Spurlock’s (2004) documentary, *Super Size Me*, describes the social motivations and preparations for his field experiment—eating nothing but McDonald’s food for 1 month. Perhaps unintentionally, Spurlock’s introduction is a masterful description of classic research design, presented in a humorous and visually arresting manner for his audience.

As a theatre practitioner, my personal knowledge of popular film titles is not at an expert’s level but is slightly above the layperson’s knowledge base.<sup>2</sup> As I prepare for each class, I access my personal knowledge of films to recall scenes that will connect with the day’s topics or learning objectives.

## Epistemology and Ontology—*The Matrix*

To introduce and discuss epistemology and ontology (slippery concepts for some students to grasp), I show an excerpt from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). In this science fiction story, the main character, Neo, discovers he is living inside a computer simulation program, and the leader of a rebel group, Morpheus, explains to him what reality is and is not in this futuristic world:

*(Neo and Morpheus in a space that’s white and void; two red leather chairs and a TV set are the only items in the world)*

Morpheus: This is The Construct. . . . It’s our loading program. . . .

Neo: Right now, we’re inside a computer program?

Morpheus: Is it really so hard to believe? . . . Your appearance now is what we call “residual self-image.” It is the mental projection of your digital self.

Neo: This, this isn’t real?

Morpheus: What *is* real? How do you define “real”? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.

*(takes a remote control and points it to the TV)*

Morpheus: This is the world that you know, the world as it was at the end of the 20th century.

*(TV images of average city life and skylines)*

Morpheus: It exists now only as part of a neural interactive simulation that we call The Matrix. You’ve been living in a dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today.

*(he uses the remote control to change the TV image: a city that looks as if it has been through nuclear war; thunder and lightning from black clouds; the image takes over the space)*

Morpheus: Welcome to the desert of the real.

Neo then learns the “truth” of his “reality”—technology’s artificial intelligence has taken over the world and uses humans as energy sources to survive. This scene stimulates a class discussion on the nature of reality and its foundations for inquiry.

## Reasoning and Assertion Development— $\pi$

In  $\pi$  [*pi*] (Aronofsky, 1998), the main character’s tormented search for a grand pattern as a mathematical answer begins with a set of propositions about stock market predictions. The voice-over reveals his complex thinking as he tries to unravel the mystery:

*(Max walks in the city, scenes of busy urban life)*

Max: 12:45: Restate my assumptions:

One: Mathematics is the language of nature.

Two: Everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers.

Three: If you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge.

Therefore: There *are* patterns everywhere in nature.

*(Max sits and looks at the patterns of leaves on a tree)*

Evidence:

The cycling of disease epidemics.

The wax and wane of caribou populations.

Sunspot cycles.

The rise and fall of the Nile.

*(Max's apartment; he looks at a banner of stock market prices scrolling)*

So what about the stock market? A universe of numbers that represents the global economy. Millions of human hands at work, billions of minds, a vast network screaming with life. An organism, a natural organism.

*(Max sits at his computer)*

My hypothesis: Within the stock market there is a pattern as well. Right in front of me, hiding behind the numbers. Always has been.

After a series of bizarre events that revolve around a 216-digit number he inadvertently discovers—a number also sought by rabbis and business people for their own personal reasons—Max seeks solace and advice from his former professor and mentor:

*(the men sit between a Go game board)*

Sol: The ancient Japanese considered the Go board to be a microcosm of the universe. Although, when it is empty it appears to be simple and ordered, the possibilities of game play are endless. They say no two Go games have even been alike, just like snowflakes. So, the Go board actually represents an extremely complex and chaotic universe. And that's the truth of our world, Max. It can't be easily summed up with math, there is no simple pattern.

Max: But as the Go game progresses the possibilities become smaller, the board does take on order, so all the moves are predictable.

Sol: And so, so?

Max: So maybe we're not sophisticated enough to be aware of it. There is a pattern, an order underlying every Go game. Maybe that pattern is like the pattern in the stock market, the Torah, this 216 number.

Sol: This is insanity, Max!

Max: Or maybe it's genius! I have to get that number!

The film is particularly applicable to several components of research, such as paradigms, heuristics and algorithms, theory generation, pattern

development, and even faulty logic and reasoning. After viewing clips from the film, I parallel Max's process to Erickson's (1986) search for patterns in a data corpus, and the disconfirming evidence that leads to the modification and revision of assertions developed through analysis.

### Phenomenology—*The Silence of the Lambs*

In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), Dr. Hannibal Lecter's extraordinary psychological insight is displayed when he quizzes FBI Agent Clarice Starling on why the serial killer at large, Buffalo Bill, does what he does. Referring to the case file, Lecter teases:

Lecter: Everything you need to find him is right there in those pages.

Clarice: Then tell me how.

Lecter: First principles, Clarice: simplicity. Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing ask, What is it in itself? What is its nature? What does he do, this man you seek?

Clarice: He kills women.

Lecter: *No*, that is incidental. What is the first and principal thing he does? What *needs* does he serve by killing?

Clarice: Anger, um, social acceptance, and, uh, sexual frustrations . . .

Lecter: *No*—he covets! That is his nature.

In the remainder of the scene, Lecter explains to Clarice how the killer covets what he sees every day, and this assertion later provides her with clues to the killer's whereabouts.

In this revelatory scene, Dr. Lecter captures the essence of the antagonist's violent nature in just one word. In the art of performance, an actor analyzes a script to find the character's *superobjective*—that one verb, the central essence that drives his actions throughout the course of the play. Perhaps my performance training and conditioning as a theatre artist transferred to my qualitative methodology when I advocated that researchers also find the participant's through-line in longitudinal inquiry: "a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph with an accompanying narrative that describes, analyzes, and/or interprets the participant's changes through time by analyzing its thematic flow—its qualitative trajectory" (Saldaña, 2003, p. 151). *The Silence of the Lambs* scene provides students opportunities to discuss human action, agency, phenomenology, and psychology's role in qualitative research.<sup>3</sup>



## Research Ethics—*Miss Evers' Boys*

The infamous Tuskegee Experiment of untreated syphilis in African American males is the subject of *Miss Evers' Boys* (Sargent & Bernstein, 1997). Nurse Eunice Evers works with Dr. Sam Brodus on treating men with the disease. But the federal government offers money to the hospital to study the progressive effects of the disease on the unsuspecting patients. The DVD jacket summarizes the ethical conflict faced by the health care providers: "Now the men must be led to believe they are being cared for, when in fact they are being denied the medicine that could cure them. Miss Evers is faced with a terrible dilemma—to abandon the experiment and tell her patients or to remain silent and offer only comfort." The initiating incident follows between Dr. Brodus and Nurse Evers after the physician accepts the government's proposal:

*(the hospital; Nurse Evers enters, excited about the funding news; to Dr. Brodus:)*

Nurse Evers: You got the money!

Dr. Brodus: You can start back at work next week.

Nurse Evers: Oh my my, you actually got those White doctors to . . .

Dr. Brodus: Doctor Douglas will be back from Washington next week, so

I want you to be ready to help him with whatever he needs.

Nurse Evers: Doctor, I was born ready.

*(they enter an examination room; Dr. Brodus closes the door and prepares a syringe)*

Dr. Brodus: Now, about the program,

Nurse Evers: I can't wait to get started!

Dr. Brodus: We'll be just studying them.

Nurse Evers: Oh, I been studying them, I know all about . . .

Dr. Brodus: We've *been* treating them. We'll just be studying them.

Nurse Evers: No treatment?

Dr. Brodus: Not for syphilis.

Nurse Evers: Well, why?

Dr. Brodus: The study will bring the money for treatment—in about 6 months to a year.

Nurse Evers: Well, what do we tell them, then? What do we do?

Dr. Brodus: Nothing.

Nurse Evers: But, I don't understand. We've been giving them the mercury rubs and—we just don't do that?

Dr. Brodus: Well, we'll continue with the rubs, but we'll be using liniment instead of mercury. They won't know the difference. And with the additional money we'll give them aspirin and tonic and vitamins, things they're never had before. I guarantee you they'll feel much, much better.

Nurse Evers: Until they don't.

Dr. Brodus: I don't think you heard me. It won't be forever.

*(they leave the room and walk into the ward)*

Nurse Evers: Just 6 months?

Dr. Brodus: Or a year.

Nurse Evers: And they'll be first in line for the treatment?

Dr. Brodus: I promise you.

*(they stop by the bed of an African American patient; Dr. Brodus holds up the syringe and speaks to him with bravado assurance)*

Dr. Brodus: All right, young fellah, this is gonna kill the germs that are making you sick. You believe me? You better believe me, I'm the doctor. Right, Nurse Evers?

Nurse Evers: *(doubtful worry on her face)* Yes, Doctor.

Dr. Brodus: Doctor knows, doesn't he?

Nurse Evers: Yes, he does.

Dr. Brodus: Cares.

Nurse Evers: Oh, yes.

*(Dr. Brodus administers the shot to the patient)*

Dr. Brodus: So, you better believe me when I tell you that everything's gonna be all right. Right, nurse?

Nurse Evers: *(nodding)* Right, doctor.

This scene from the film provides not only the opportunity to discuss the historic contexts of human subjects violations, but also the personal and ethical dilemmas we face as researchers when we have knowledge our participants do not.

## Codes and Categories—*The Final Cut*

Alan Hakman is a "cutter" in the science fiction drama, *The Final Cut* (Naïm, 2004). Humans can be implanted before birth with memory devices

in their brains that literally record their full lives. On death, the implant is removed from the body and taken to a cutter, who reviews the human's life on a massive computer (nicknamed "The Guillotine") and splices together a film tribute to play at the deceased's funeral or memorial service. But how does one reduce decades of a life into a short film? The Guillotine automatically codes, categorizes, and sorts the recorded life by organizing millions of recorded images for the cutter. It is then up to the cutter to make selective and artistic choices for the final tribute:

*(thousands of images flash by on the computer monitor)*

The Guillotine's Voice: Receiving . . . footage: Charles Bannister. Processing  
544,628 life hours.

Sorting life files:

Childhood,

Sleep,

Puberty,

Eating,

Awkward Phase,

Romantic Life,

Temptation,

Personal Hygiene,

Religion,

Tragedy,

Wedding,

Masturbation,

Fears,

Athletics,

Growth Spurt,

University,

Violence,

School,

Courtship,

Career, . . .

This scene demonstrates how the life course or life story can be categorized into stages of development, biological functions, activities, rituals, and other social constructs. It stimulates a discussion on how one "orders" the idiosyncratic life, and how one decides what is mundane, significant, and epiphanic. The scene also generates reflection on the categories we create for massive amounts of data, and whether the topic or descriptive codes above best serve the study at hand.

## Data Analysis—*Contact*

Data analysis is one of the most difficult methods to instruct in qualitative inquiry courses, and the fictional dilemmas portrayed in film offer vignettes of characters in similar circumstances. In *Contact* (Zemeckis, 1997), a scientific team attempts to decode thousands of pages of data sent by aliens from Vega:

*(the White House briefing room; square pages of encrypted text sent from Vega are projected on a screen; Ellie and others are speaking with a government official, Rachel Constantine)*

Ellie: They're actually data—huge amounts of it . . . encrypted pages of text.

Now, no two are alike, and we've uncovered over 10,000 already.

Rachel: What does it mean, Doctor?

Ellie: Well, we have no idea . . .

Rachel: How long will it take to decode it?

Ellie: Uh, it could take forever. We really need a primer, a key. . . .

*(Ellie's lab station; square pages of the encrypted text on clear plastic sheets are being arranged and rearranged on a lighted screen by her research assistant)*

Ellie: *(frustrated)* They've gotta line up somehow.

Assistant: Yeah, well this one doesn't fit either.

Scientist: We've tried over a million permutations. Out of this, I could only get three quarters to fit. I don't understand the significance.

It is only when they find the primer, discovered by looking at the data in a different way, that they succeed:

*(S. R. Hadden's private jet, a private meeting between him and Ellie; the unethical industrialist has hacked into Ellie's database and copied the encrypted pages of text sent by the Vegans; he slyly alludes that he wishes to leave the world a major contribution before he dies)*

Ellie: You've found the primer!

Hadden: Clever girl. *(calling out)* Lights!

*(lights in the room dim; his projection screen shows the square pages of encrypted text rearranging and aligning themselves in various patterns)*

Hadden: Pages and pages of data, over 63,000 in all. And on the perimeter of each . . .

Ellie: A line of symbols, a registration mark. But they don't line up.

Hadden: They *do*—if you think like a Vegan. An alien intelligence has got to be more advanced, and that means efficiency functioning on multiple levels and in multiple dimensions.

*(three pages of encrypted text “fold” together to create a three-dimensional shape; the intersect corner blinks, suggesting a perfect match)*

Ellie: Yes, of course! Where’s the primer?

Hadden: You’ll see.

*(three-dimensional cubic pages of encrypted text rotate to show highlighted, symbolic codes embedded within them)*

Hadden: Every three-dimensional page contains a piece of the primer. There it was all the time, staring you in the face.

*(transition to Ellie speaking at the White House briefing room to government officials; the projection screen shows the highlighted symbolic codes as formulas)*

Ellie: Buried within the message itself is the key to decoding it. Within the layering of the matrix we have these basic equations. So with this very elementary foundation they’ve given us a kind of general scientific vocabulary. We now have the symbols for “true” and “false.” . . . And when we apply this to the rest of the message, we find this:

*(the slide transforms from formulas to complex schematic diagrams, illustrating how to build a transport device to Vega)*

This conflict and its resolution parallel the qualitative researcher’s journey through pages and pages of text to discover what may be “hidden” within, and how we can make sense of and find meaning when we reassemble data in new and different ways.

## **Film Titles to Supplement the Instruction of Qualitative Research**

The following topics, typically addressed in introductory qualitative research methods courses, can be accompanied with scenes from popular

film titles illustrating the principles at work. Several titles provide multiple topics for discussion:

## Research Genres

- Case studies: *The Final Cut*, *The Truman Show*, *49 Up* (and the entire *Up* series)
- Survey research: *Kinsey*
- Quantitative (and qualitative) research:  $\pi$  [*pi*], *A Beautiful Mind*
- Longitudinal research/change: *The Truman Show*, *49 Up*, *Half Nelson*
- Action research: *Dangerous Minds*, *Kindergarten Cop*
- Life course research: *The Final Cut*, *49 Up*
- Phenomenology: *The Silence of the Lambs*
- Field experiments: *Super Size Me*
- Critical ethnography: *Bowling for Columbine*
- Performance ethnography/ethnodrama: *Twilight: Los Angeles, The Laramie Project*, *The Exonerated*, *United 93*

## Research Methodology and Methods

- Epistemology and ontology: *The Matrix*
- Research design: *Super Size Me*
- Research ethics: *The Truman Show*, *Krippendorf's Tribe*, *Miss Evers' Boys*
- Participant observation/fieldwork: *The Truman Show*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*
- Interview techniques: *Kinsey*, *49 Up*, *The Laramie Project*, *The Guys*, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*
- Inductive and deductive reasoning: *Memento*, *Fargo*,  $\pi$  [*pi*], *The Silence of the Lambs*
- Codes and categories: *The Final Cut*
- Triangulation: *Minority Report*
- Cause and effect: *The Butterfly Effect*
- Correlation/interrelationship: *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Number 23*
- Data reduction and analysis: *A Beautiful Mind*, *Contact*, *The Final Cut*, *The Silence of the Lambs*
- Mixed methods: *Super Size Me*

CNN television broadcasts are also excellent sources of innovative commercials that transfer to the qualitative research methods course as learning opportunities. For example, a commercial for New York Life shows a split screen with parallel actions occurring in the same settings in the past (left side of the screen) and future (right side of the screen). The intent of the

commercial is to show how the company and its clients endure “through changing times.” This impressive clip provides a microsimulation opportunity for students to examine and compare visual data from one time period through the next, and to explore basic analytic techniques for discerning individual and social change.

## Applications

Graduate students in my qualitative research methods course attest (“Yay! Movies!”) that the media tools I use in our classes are novel, motivating, enjoyable to watch, and help clarify concepts that could not be grasped from reading a textbook. The video clips:

- introduce qualitative research topics (“Alan Hakman’s job in *The Final Cut* is very similar to what we do in qualitative analysis—take massive amounts of data and reduce them to their essence”);
- illustrate basic principles and techniques of inquiry (“What were the qualitative and quantitative measures Morgan Spurlock took in *Super Size Me* to assess the effects of eating McDonald’s food for a month?”);
- generate classroom discussion and reflection (“What, to you, was unethical about the corporation’s use of Truman in *The Truman Show*?”);
- clarify misunderstood constructs (“As *Kinsey* illustrated, there’s no such thing as an ‘objective’ interview—you have to consider all the participant contexts”);
- function as referential mnemonics (“Do you remember that excerpt from *Fargo* when Marge examined the evidence at the crime scene? That’s similar to what you do when you first enter the field—deduce the site’s history before you came onto the scene”);
- teach selected principles more effectively than traditional classroom pedagogy (“Let’s not just talk about performance ethnography—let’s see it in action. Here’s a scene from Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles*, in which she performs a verbatim interview she conducted with a storekeeper”).

In these film excerpts, art imitates qualitative life, and art is used to teach the science of naturalistic inquiry.

Not addressed in this article is the scholarship on the sociology of and in film (e.g., Denzin, 1995, 2002), the film as arts-based research representation (Barone & Eisner, 1997), and the intriguing possibilities of student ethnographers as small-scale independent filmmakers (Young, 2007). The accessibility of digital technology has democratized the medium to such an

extent that film *production* as well as film viewing in the qualitative research methods course is an intriguing possibility as a curriculum module assignment. This article's content is just one small sample of the creative applications of film in the graduate classroom.

Education at all levels continually searches for best practices to replicate in comparable classroom contexts. These mediated strategies for enriching the instruction of qualitative research methods at the university level provide professors and their students novel and engaging techniques to stimulate discussion, clarify abstract concepts, and demonstrate how the cinematic arts can teach as well as entertain.

## Notes

1. There is a series of educational videos/DVDs by The Standard Deviants Academic Team ([www.standarddeviants.com](http://www.standarddeviants.com)) who survey introductory secondary- and college-level subject area concepts in humorous and rapid-fire vignettes. The *Sociology* and *Statistics* series include a few relevant scenes for viewing in qualitative and quantitative research methods courses.

2. All film titles listed and referenced in this article can be located in most retail video/DVD rental stores, and are available for purchase online from such distributors as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). For more detailed information about films, access the Internet Movie Database at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). Selections from films quoted in this article were transcribed from video/DVD soundtracks and not extracted from their published screenplays.

3. A fascinating exercise I experienced during a drama demonstration session reinforced the power of cinema: If you could have been cast to portray any character from any film, which one would it have been? Your role choice may suggest a deep personal need if you reflect carefully on the character and his or her actions in the film. For example, Dr. Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs* was my personal choice—but not because I want to be a psychopathic murderer! Dr. Lecter has keen analytic insight, a “high powered perception” of others. Growing up, I was frequently called “stupid” by my mother, and my subsequent education was driven by a personal need to achieve high grades and other scholastic accomplishments to prove her wrong. Dr. Lecter's level of analytic brilliance, albeit shrouded in criminal notoriety, is what I myself strive for in my own qualitative data inquiry.

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**Johnny Saldaña** is a professor of theatre in the Arizona State University School of Theatre and Film. His research methods books, *Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change through Time*, and *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, are published by AltaMira Press.