

## **Teaching Psychology through Popular Film: A Curriculum**

By

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### **Abstract**

*An undergraduate course, "Psychology and Film," was developed as an honors elective. Each week students and the instructor viewed a feature film depicting a psychological disorder or related issue such as family dysfunction, resilience, or death and dying. Accompanying assigned readings featured first person accounts of mental health problems and psychotherapy as well as articles on using film as an adjunct to psychological treatment. The class was further structured by brief lectures on the condition depicted in the week's film as well as focused discussion questions about each film. Both qualitative and quantitative reviews of the course were positive.*

### **1. Introduction**

Video clips are an increasingly common addition to classroom instruction in post-secondary education . Many textbooks publishers now routinely include collections of video clips as part of the textbook package for college instructors. Use of fictionalized film accounts with psychological content has historically, been much less common. However, in the past 5-10 years, there has been a growing literature on film as a tool for professional, graduate, and undergraduate education (Searight & Allmayer, 2014; Wedding, Boyd & Niemic, 2010). This article describes a course, "Psychology and Film," offered through Lake Superior State University's Honors program.

#### ***Portrayals of Mental Health Issues in Popular Film***

Film is a socially pervasive medium with considerable power to shape attitudes and beliefs. Wedding, Boyd and Niemic (2010) note that for much of the lay public, film may be the primary information source about mental illness and its treatment. Unfortunately, from a pedagogical perspective, many cinematic depictions erroneously portray persons with mental illness as dangerous or even demonic as in *The Exorcist* (Wedding, Boyd, & Niemic, 2010). Alternatively, film may lead unknowing audiences to believe that interesting and unusual, yet rare, symptoms of mental illness to be commonplace. For example, in *Rainman*, Dustin Hoffman portrays Raymond, a young adult with autism, as a savant with incredible eidetic memory. Raymond's memory skills are so well-developed that he repeatedly wins at blackjack by counting cards and is eventually barred from the casino. Since autism is a relatively rare condition with which many people will have little contact, it is likely that moviegoers may erroneously conclude that all persons with autism have this skill that actually characterizes fewer than 2% of individuals with the condition (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2011).

Mental health treatment often receives equally erroneous portrayals in film. In films like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," psychiatric hospitals appear to be dungeons of horrors where electroconvulsive "shock" therapy and lobotomies are common occurrences. Finally, cinematic portrayals of psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychiatric nurses often present these professionals as narcissistic, rigid, and emotionally cold (Wedding, Boyd, & Niemic, 2010) At times, such as in *What About Bob ?*, mental health professionals exhibit behavior that is more bizarre than that of the patients they are treating. As will be discussed further, cinematic portrayals of psychotherapists are often unrealistic. Mental health professionals often appear to be saint-like, eternally available professionals treating patients who become members of the therapist's extended family.

### ***Overview of “Psychology and Film’s” Course Content***

In the course developed by the first author and taken as student by the second author, the majority of the films were “Hollywood style” feature films. The course was divided into three sections: abnormal psychology, family dynamics and treatment of mental health conditions. For abnormal psychology, the following feature films were used to address specific conditions: *As Good as It Gets* (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), *Winter’s Bone* (Methamphetamine use and production), *Mr. Jones* (Bipolar Disorder), *When a Man Loves a Woman* (Alcohol abuse and the family), *A Beautiful Mind* (Schizophrenia), *Girl Interrupted* (Borderline Personality Disorder) and *Rain Man* (Autism). Family dynamics were explored in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (portraying a family with a child with pervasive developmental disorder, the death of husband/father due to suicide and a mother with pathological obesity) and *Pieces of April* (a mother with terminal cancer; a young adult daughter who has been cut-off from family). Psychotherapy was depicted in *What About Bob?* and *Antwone Fisher* as well as in *Mr. Jones*. Resilience and the family dynamics of child physical and sexual abuse were examined with the

film, *Precious*. Finally, two documentaries were included: *My Mother’s Garden* (Obsessive Compulsive Hoarding) and *The Beales of Grey Gardens* (Deviance; Psychiatry and Social Control)

### ***The Structure of the Class***

Each class section followed a predictable schedule. Prior to viewing the film, the instructor presented a brief lecture addressing the topic(s) of the film. For example, before the film, *Girl Interrupted*, the instructor described the symptoms and treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder, exhibited by the main character, Susanna Kaysen (played by Winona Ryder). Some theorists believe that rapid social change may contribute to Borderline Personality Disorder’s etiology (Paris & Lise, 2013). The film occurs in the late 1960s, an era of social upheaval including challenges to the traditional roles of women—a factor which the class was encouraged to consider while watching the movie. In addition, for films depicting a mental health diagnosis, the class was given a copy of the criteria (symptoms) for diagnosis—taken from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)—and encouraged to identify the specific symptoms exhibited. In addition, students were each given a list of eight to ten questions to consider during the film. The practice of orienting the class to key content in the film helps maximize the film’s educational value and helps direct students to the salient factual material.

With this preparation as background, the film was then shown. During teaching, the instructor (HRS) has often stopped educational videos at various points to discuss specific issues this technique was not used in this course; students and the instructor watched the film together without interruption. As Green (n.d.) has noted, by viewing the film together with the students, rather than starting the movie and leaving the room, the instructor conveys the importance of the film as course content.

If the instructor leaves the room, it may convey that the students are being “entertained” while the instructor attends to more important duties.

Immediately after the film concluded, students were encouraged to give their visceral critique of the film (“good,” “bad,” “so-so”). The discussion was then guided by the questions given at the outset of the film as well as diagnostic issues. Common issues raised included the portrayal of a given condition in film compared with the DSM-TR criteria for that condition, approaches to treatment of mental health conditions, patterns of family dynamics, or hypotheses about causes of the psychiatric disorders being portrayed.

Assigned readings emphasized first person accounts of mental illness or psychotherapy. For example, selections from Rapoport’s (1991) *The Boy Who Couldn’t Stop Washing* described obsessive compulsive disorder and a chapter from Yalom’s (1989) *Love’s Executioner* described psychotherapy sessions as well as the therapist’s cognitive-affective reactions to patients. Other readings designed to

highlight specific conditions included *Thinking in Pictures* by Grandin (2011) which provides a first person account of a high functioning person with autism and *Loud in the House of Myself* by Pershall (2011) to complement the portrayal of Borderline Personality Disorder in *Girl Interrupted*. Assigned readings also included articles about the use of film as a therapeutic tool by clinical practitioners (Lampropoulos, Kazantzis, & Deane (2004).

### ***Encouraging Critical Thinking***

As noted above, a frequent criticism of feature films by mental health professionals is that cinema presents an unrealistic picture of psychiatric disorders and psychotherapy. Patients with psychological disorders are often portrayed as unrealistically bizarre or are stigmatized as dangerous or unpredictable. Psychotherapists are also portrayed as having 24 hour availability, blurring the role of friend/lover and professional, and as manifesting significant psychological disturbance, themselves.

These mischaracterizations, however, can have considerable pedagogical value. For example, in the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, portraying John Nash, a brilliant mathematician, in his battle with schizophrenia, hallucinations are depicted. However, rather than being the more common auditory hallucinations associated with schizophrenia, Nash's psychotic episodes are characterized by visual hallucinations. This discrepancy permits several useful educational points—First, the nature of the hallucinations, themselves; but secondly, the likelihood that the filmmaker depicted Nash seeing things because it made for a better film than disembodied voices.

The inaccurate portrayal of psychotherapists in *Mr. Jones*, *Antwone Fisher*, and *What About Bob?* provoked wide ranging discussion in the class. In all three films, mental health professionals do not maintain appropriate professional boundaries. In *Mr. Jones*, a patient with severe bipolar disorder, portrayed by Richard Gere, has a sexual relationship with his psychiatrist, Dr. Elizabeth Bowen (Lena Olin). After the encounter, Dr. Bowen transfers Mr. Jones' care to another psychiatrist which infuriates Jones. The film ends with Jones on a rooftop, ready to jump, until Dr. Bowen arrives and talks him out of it—immediately followed by an intimate embrace. The conclusion's implication is that they continue their romantic relationship. While not as disturbing, *Antwone Fisher*, a film focusing on Fisher's psychotherapy as he addresses childhood trauma which contributes to angry, aggressive outbursts against his fellow navy enlisted men, also includes overly fluid boundaries frowned upon by mental health professionals. Dr. Davenport (Denzel Washington), Fisher's navy psychiatrist, invites Fisher to his home for a Thanksgiving dinner with his extended family. During dinner, an uncomfortable exchange ensues when Dr. Davenport's father pumps Fisher for information about his background.

Both of these films were used to discuss role clarity and boundaries in all professional relationships—a topic that most undergraduates have not considered in detail. Students seem to viscerally understand that the relationships depicted in these films are wrong but have difficulty articulating the ethical dimensions that make these relationships inappropriate. When professor-student romantic encounters are raised as an analogy, students appreciate that the faculty member has a responsibility to act in the student's best interests (beneficence). In addition, the class typically recognizes that these student-professor affairs may be psychologically harmful to students, reflecting the principle of non-maleficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009).

### ***Ethical Issues***

Discussing psychologically sensitive topics may produce unintended adverse psychological reactions. For example, classroom discussions or readings about childhood sexual abuse or rape are likely to be about experiences sadly common among college and university students—particularly women. Given the high reported prevalence of childhood sexual abuse, estimated at over 25% among college women (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1990), it is very likely that classroom discussions or films addressing these topics may trigger strong emotional reactions among victims. While lectures on these topics may provoke flashbacks, nightmares, or other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, film, because it often

deliberately includes techniques to elicit emotion in the audience, has a greater potential for provoking psychological disorganization in vulnerable students. Similarly, realistic violence is often a staple of Hollywood action films and may also be difficult for some students to watch.

The film, *Precious*, was chosen for the course after a good deal of deliberation by the instructor who viewed all of the films at least twice before showing them to the class. Precious, an adolescent girl, has two children—by her own father. In addition, Precious' mother sadistically abuses Precious—both psychologically and physically. In a rage, she attempts to drop a television on Precious from an upper floor—barely missing the teenager. There are several scenes of the father having sex with Precious. However, Precious emerges from this destructive family as a strong, goal-directed young woman through the efforts of her teacher and the support of her fellow students at an alternative high school. The film is difficult to watch.

Yet, Precious depicts the characteristics of resilient children. She values education and school, has a stable, concerned adult in her life (her teacher), and an understanding group of friends.

Precious was shown in the course but only after the instructor informed the class in advance, both in writing on the syllabus and verbally in class, that viewing the film was not required and that another film could be substituted. Similarly, prior to the class watching *Winter's Bone*, about methamphetamine culture in rural Missouri, the instructor warned the student audience about a particularly gruesome scene and indicated where in the film, the scene occurred. Students were told that immediately prior to this section, they could leave for several minutes if watching the protagonist, Rea (Jennifer Lawrence) cutting off her dead father's arms would be troubling.

## 2. Conclusion

Narrative student evaluations indicated that the class was well-received and that students have since asked when it will be offered again. Although some students recommended removing some films from the line-up (The Beales of Grey Gardens and to a lesser extent, Pieces of April), most of the films received positive responses. Students particularly liked the active component of looking for key symptoms in films depicting psychiatric conditions. For students who were skeptical about psychology, the use of popular films was a relatively "painless" and entertaining introduction to the subject.

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## Teaching Psychology through Popular Film: A Curriculum

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