

# **Pop Culture Pedagogy: Television and Film as Simulated Ethnographic Data**

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Anthropological theory often appears as the capstone course for undergraduate anthropology majors – the final barrier to the degree or perhaps even ‘becoming an anthropologist’. Despite its importance, however, this class is often underappreciated and its full potential left unrealized due to a lack of student engagement. The abstract language of original texts can be intimidating and difficult to apply to the complex realities of daily life. In addition, simply learning about theory does not prepare students to function as critical thinkers, much less future practitioners. This paper profiles a successful compromise: the use of popular television and film as accessible proxies for ethnographic data. Commercial media appeals to student preferences for high production values and contemporary visuals, while providing instructors with a uniform set of simplified phenomena for the application of theory. Here, this usage is (1) outlined with an example from the television series, *LOST*, which originally aired on the ABC network from 2004 to 2010, and (2) grounded by both a larger consideration of the criteria for successful media selection and a critical examination of the role of popular culture and technology within the classroom.

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## **The Trope of the Modern Student**

I basically believe that media is the pedagogy of our times.  
-bell hooks (in Hooks and Sealey 2008:148)

In the fall of 2007, *A Vision of Students Today* went viral. This brief YouTube video, depicting student perceptions of education (see Wesch 2008), garnered over one million hits in its first month and captured the attention of the blogosphere. At first glance, the video seems an unlikely candidate for mass appeal. As the product of a class project

initiated by Michael Wesch in his Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course at Kansas State, the video covers relatively benign ground: class size, time management, and average material and tuition costs. The imagery is simple, providing a text-based narrative written first as graffiti on an empty lecture hall's walls and seatbacks and then in the displayed notebooks and laptop screens of the students now seated in the classroom. These students silently present frequencies taken from an internal class survey, their actions accompanied by a subdued, electronica track. Yet despite these unassuming elements, a profound portrayal of student disengagement emerges – one that is unambiguous in attributing blame.

Wesch's video relies on a series of striking comparisons – most notably the implicit comparison of static, outdated modes of learning that revolve around desks, chalkboards, and classroom walls, which “cannot talk,” and the voice given to students through their use of the constantly evolving, collaborative medium of a Google document. Themes of old and new, tradition and modernity, are literally inscribed onto the built environment of the classroom, as the viewer is invited to compare fixed graffiti on a chair to rapid, on-screen edits. The overall effect is a damning juxtaposition of the “nineteenth century environment that still characterizes the educational establishment,” with Wesch's own web-based approach (Wesch 2007:0:06-0:20). For those who fail to respond to subtlety, there is also a text overlay, “Some have suggested that technology can save us” (Wesch 2007: 3:33).

This appeal to the need for modern technology has been a constant refrain among proponents of media-based teaching. As Bird and Godwin (2006:285) note, there is a common assumption within the literature that current students are the unique product of a “media-saturated society” and are distinct in their ingrained predisposition and need for media-based instruction. This sentiment has been regularly expressed for nearly forty years, ranging from Smith's (1973:51) depiction of a “highly sophisticated audio-visual generation” to Maller and Rossy's (2003:609) assertion that, “Students today have become accustomed to learning through multimedia and are easily bored or distracted by more traditional pedagogies.” The overarching message is a mandate to ramp up the technology for a new generation of multitasking, hyper-thinkers. This is not, however, the message here. Instead, I argue that media is only as good as its application, and that its strengths and weaknesses as a medium of instruction must be evaluated in context. But before turning to the classroom environment and recommendations for the selection of video

media, the trope of the modern student must be addressed.

As highlighted by Appadurai (1996:3), Western social science likes to theorize around the modern moment, “a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present.” It is unsurprising that this framework – a decisive component of the work of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim – should carry over into our thoughts about education in the “modern” era. Appadurai (1996) himself posits electronic media as a transformative force, corresponding well with Wesch’s (2008) depiction of the classroom as fundamentally changed by an enveloping “cloud of ubiquitous digital information.” Certainly, there are differences in scale – differences with important implications for economic, political, and cultural interactions, which we as anthropologists would do well to notice (e.g., Ginsburg et al. 2002). Yet, we are deceiving ourselves with this notion of an imagined past in which students were passive receptacles reliant upon their teachers to convey scarce, otherwise inaccessible information. Divergent narratives and alternative stimuli have always been a feature of the human experience, and higher education is essentially training in how to navigate these competing sources. Skinner (1964:483) famously noted that “education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten,” emphasizing that facts and details are disproved or lost to time, while ways of knowing endure. Ultimately, education is about how to think critically, how to evaluate and process data, and how to judge the reliability of sources. The introduction of multimedia fails to change its underlying nature, making media best understood as simply another device in the pedagogical toolkit.

It is with this framework in mind that I approach the use of media, rejecting Champoux’s (1999) notion that films “speak for themselves” and employing them instead as a source of simulated ethnographic data for the application of theory. This technique builds on a research tradition in which noted American anthropologists Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson drew heavily on propaganda films and popular cinema to assess the cultural traits of enemy nations during and after World War II (see Ginsburg 1994). It also mimics the skills developed through fieldwork as students are trained to be attentive to both significant and seemingly insignificant details, which are then analyzed, categorized, and presented through the process of theory building (Leblanc 1998). The substitution of media – specifically film and television – for the interpersonal interactions of firsthand data collection overcomes many of

the time and resource constraints of traditional course structures as well as issues of safety, legal liability, and ethics, which emerge when individuals' lives and experiences are used as a training ground. Moreover, when teaching theory, media clips serve as a comfortable bridge between the students' academic and personal worlds, addressing a critique voiced by Grimshaw and Hart (1993) and later echoed by Coleman and Simpson (1999). For these authors, anthropology routinely fails to connect its students as individuals with the larger world in which they live – an oversight that reinforces the discipline as esoteric and firmly situated in Trouillot's (1991) "savage slot." Video media, however, makes these connections and does so in a familiar, approachable way by offering simplified depictions of common, yet difficult to observe, phenomena like conflict and deception that would be otherwise inaccessible for undergraduate analysis (Huber 2009, Shields and Kidd 1973, Vande Berg 1991). Though neither a panacea nor somehow uniquely modern, the use of media does provide an efficient, low-risk source of data that can be used to model the application of anthropological concepts and theory.

### **Concerns in Media Selection**

I do remember a literature professor walking by my classroom while we were watching a television show and transgressively shouting through the open door, "Pretty low brow, Professor!"

-S.M. Ross (2009:151-152)

Despite the push for technical innovation, popular culture in the classroom remains controversial, and calls for its use must anticipate and address the issue of academic standards. As encapsulated by Ross' (2009) experience, a clear conflict exists for institutional education when it comes to weighing the "cultural present" against the "canonized past" (Luke 1997:21). Broughton (2008), for example, documents in American and British schools a long-standing aversion to popular culture, which is routinely expressed through food metaphors that draw on the mass appeal and youthful associations of popular culture to characterize it as form of intellectual junk food. Appropriate educational content, in contrast, is seen as a more mature, cultured product that cannot be fully appreciated without specialized training. The implied contrast of popular culture and high culture is unavoidable. It invokes the unpleasant specter of

anthropology's ethnocentric past, specifically theories of unilineal evolution and Tylor's (1873) conception of "Culture" as a single body of information of which different human groups had variable amounts, reflecting their relative advancement. Contemporary anthropology clearly rejects these cultural ranking systems. Yet even as we teach the value of cultural diversity, we remain hesitant at the prospect of substituting Hollywood productions for classic ethnographic film. Certain forms of cultural expression thus continue to be privileged over others.

Part of this hesitancy can be traced to the Marxist anti-populist movement of the Frankfurt school, which viewed popular culture as an impediment to "the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (Adorno & Rabinbach 1975:18). This healthy skepticism of the media machine is similarly expressed by Postman (1985) in his classic critique of television as an incoherent, anti-participatory medium defined by its mandate to entertain. These are legitimate concerns, particularly given media's overwhelming commercialization and the near monopoly on messaging held by the industry's 'big six': General Electric, Walt Disney, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom, and CBS. Yet, Dolby (2003:263) argues that it is this potential for power and control – media's role in constructing "taken-for-granted understandings about life, its possibilities, and its limits" – that makes popular culture a vital, pedagogical site. In a near reversal of Postman (1985), she advances the necessity of classroom instruction on the cultural impact of media.

While acknowledging the value of Dolby's approach, I want to promote a simpler application for film and television, one that moves outside the realm of media scholarship and is capable of productively incorporating (almost) any content. This is accomplished by revising our goal and approach and reconceptualizing television and film not as factual content or a means of transporting students to distant fieldsites (see Bird and Godwin 2006) but rather as a purposeful simulation and heuristic device. On-screen stimuli become the basis for constructing thought experiments to assess a given concept or school of thought. Conceived of as such, it is no longer a question of substituting *LOST* or even *Off the Verandah* (Singer and Dakowski 1986) for Malinowski's original works, but rather a question of identifying the most useful clip to facilitate the application of his theories. Oriented by this narrowly defined objective, I draw on existing literature to establish the following three guidelines as a set of basic, best practices for media selection in undergraduate theory

courses.

*Avoid Ethnographic Films and Filmed Lectures*

Though it may initially seem counter-intuitive, classic ethnographic films have been shown to reinforce existing cultural stereotypes; are perceived as outdated, irrelevant, and generally unpleasant; and are often employed by students as evidence that the instructor or anthropology itself is “out of touch with modern sensibilities” (Bird and Godwin 2006:290). The potential for film to reify existing notions of the “primitive” is particularly well documented for the Yanomamo, the indigenous Amazonian group famously portrayed by Tim Asch in such titles as *A Man Called Bee*, *The Ax Fight*, and *The Feast*. As early as 1973, Thomas Hearne and Paul DeVore reported that their substitution of a series of twelve films for the standard lecture format of two introductory anthropology courses had simply provided students with a wider factual base with which to support their previous ethnocentric characterizations (Martinez 1995). Hearne and DeVore failed to effect appreciable attitudinal changes among their students despite their significant time investment (seven class periods) and careful blending of ‘fierce’ (e.g., *The Feast*) and ‘peaceful’ (e.g., *Dedeheiwa Weeds the Garden*) depictions of the Yanomamo. Martinez (1995) documents a similar effect among undergraduate students at the University of Southern California in the 1980s. Many of these students reported a profound sense of distance and alienation with respect to the “gross” and “barbaric” actions they witnessed on the screen, despite the guidance and extensive contextualization provided by teacher-filmmaker, Asch. Moreover, even Asch (in Martinez 1995:56) admits to his inability to reliably connect with students using ethnographic film, stating, “I’m just not reaching them, I don’t know what they’re getting out of it, if anything, or if their worst prejudices and biases and ignorances are just being reinforced.”

Martinez (1995:62) uses these reactions to argue against the widespread use of ethnographic film as a “mere anthropological illustration of the other,” which avoids “critical analysis of the textual politics of the representation.” The takeaway here – echoing Heider (1976), Rollwagen (1988), and Banks (1992) – is that media cannot stand alone without inviting misreading. Given the complexities of representation and the well documented tendency for film and television to serve as a “celluloid Rorschach” uncovering viewers’ underlying biases

and sensitivities, it is best to avoid introducing potentially problematic depictions of non-Western and subaltern populations unless course goals allow for a careful ethnographic framing of these groups (Demerath 1981, Hall 1980). This is rarely the case for dedicated theory courses, where time and attention are diverted to students struggling with the abstract language of original texts. As instructors, we have considerably more latitude with our treatment of fictional characters. We can question, poke fun, and play devil's advocate with abandon in our attempts to provoke class participation and enhance comprehension.

Moreover, students are more receptive to the high production value of commercial media (Shields and Kidd 1973, Vande Berg 1991). In their survey of undergraduate students at the University of South Florida, Bird and Godwin (2006:289-290) note a distaste for traditional ethnographic films – particularly those with a heavy reliance on narration – and a corresponding preference for “entertaining, fast-moving, contemporary visuals.” In a similar vein, the students resolutely rejected as “arrogant, pompous, and, above all, boring,” Stephen Jay Gould’s phenomenal filmed lecture, *Evolution and Human Equality* (Bird and Godwin 2006:289). These results are both surprising and instructive, pointing to the fact that students are more positive about contemporary film and television, which they view as a comfortable, familiar medium more deserving of their attention. Ultimately, not all media is created equal, and if Gould and Asch are hard pressed to successfully challenge student preconceptions through ethnographic film and filmed lectures, it is a good indication that we should pursue alternatives.

### *Keep it Brief*

Writing in an earlier era, Smith (1973:56) happily promotes a selection of films ranging from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Week End* to the *Twilight Zone* series as a means of “freeing” instructors of 65 percent of their in-class responsibilities while preserving positive student evaluations. When applied solely as a “baby-sitting device,” longer media segments clearly result in more instructor free time, but this use of media leaves its pedagogic potential largely untapped (Heider 1976:130). Contrary to Smith’s (1973) conception, instructors must be present and actively engaged if film and television are to be meaningfully employed in the classroom. Bird and Godwin (2006:296) suggest that selected media be introduced, contextualized, and explicitly linked to course content prior to

viewing in order to justify students' attention; paused intermittently to refocus the class and draw attention to specific points; and then dissected post-viewing to make students "process what they have seen." This level of interaction is time-intensive and requires shorter clips to promote the appropriate ratio of viewing to discussion. This is particularly vital when the intent of the exercise is to introduce media as proxy data for training in explicit awareness and the application of anthropological concepts. Here the depicted actions and content are less important than the students' observations and corresponding theory-building – a fact that classroom time management should reflect.

By 'keeping it brief' with respect to media selection, we both allow time for collaborative learning and bypass the documented, short attention spans of undergraduates. My personal experience echoes these findings for upper-level majors and further indicates that 20-minute segments are ideal for focused, theory-based analysis. This timeframe promotes greater attention to detail and more productive, evidence-based class discussions. Providing a relatively brief set of stimuli mitigates the student tendency to substitute synopsis for analysis and produces a more manageable task. Shorter selections also avoid the temptation to assign media for out-of-class viewing. Though initially attractive due to the easy accessibility of feature films and popular television series, independent viewing fails to inspire the same complex, nuanced interpretations that result from "situated interactions" like group viewing, as evidenced by Englehart (2003).

### *Add Variety*

The third and final guideline is a practical consideration based largely on my classroom experiences and background as the facilitator of a reflective practice teaching circle. It is targeted at instructors who are new to teaching theory with popular film and television and is intended to minimize the initial time investment and risk involved. The development of a themed course, focused on a single film or series (e.g., Huber 2009, Winegarden et al. 1993), requires extensive background knowledge on the part of the instructor and relies on the name recognition and continued popularity of the featured media to maintain interest and enrollment. Diverse media selections have the potential to appeal to a wider range of students and are more easily replaced if a given example becomes dated or otherwise fails to connect. In my own courses, I employ multiple film

and television segments: (1) to emphasize that anthropological theory can be usefully applied to nearly any medium and (2) to discourage students from becoming preoccupied with a given storyline. No class is the same, and a variety of media sources allows for piecemeal substitutions tailored to fit student interests (as well as selective updates) without threatening the core structure of the course. Although somewhat anecdotal, my course evaluations consistently support this strategy and often include enthusiastic student suggestions for additional media sources.

### **Applications: Teaching Theory with LOST**

Having characters I know well to attach to these ideas makes me feel like I'm learning something, which is extremely important and fulfilling.

-Student Evaluation (Spring 2011)

Having profiled these basic recommendations in support of a variety of brief clips drawn from commercial film and television, I would like to conclude by outlining my technique for the use of popular media as a proxy for ethnographic data. This case study is drawn from my work in an upper-level, undergraduate seminar at the University of Alabama, which focuses on past and contemporary theories in sociocultural anthropology. The course is taught once-weekly in a 150-minute block; the first hour consists of an interactive lecture on the history and development of a selected school of thought with the remainder of the class devoted to the application of theory. It consistently enrolls around 25 students and is a required course for the major. While multiple media offerings could be highlighted, I have chosen to focus on a single example from the series LOST. I employ this clip early in the semester, and it is consistently successful as a means of introducing students to the concept of applying theory, demonstrating alternative theoretical approaches to the same set of phenomena, and underscoring differential emphasis on (1) the role of the individual versus the collective, (2) structure versus agency, and (3) materialist versus idealist approaches.

The television series, LOST, originally aired on the ABC network from 2004 to 2010, garnering both popular success and critical acclaim. With an average of 15.7 million American viewers during its first season and a continued Internet presence and cult appeal, LOST has wide-ranging, contemporary relevance (ABC Medianet 2005). It is visually and emotionally stimulating with an award-winning ensemble cast and one of the highest production values on television (Ryan 2005). In addition to

piquing student interest with its strong images, compelling storylines, and established popularity, *LOST* simulates the bounded cultures of classic anthropological theory. The show's plot centers on a set of plane crash survivors stranded on a remote, and largely deserted, island in the South Pacific as they attempt to survive in their new environment. We observe the development of new social structures, alliances, and hierarchies and witness a series of interactions and conflicts between the nascent survivor society and "the Others," a vaguely identified group, which is routinely exoticized for the audience. This restricted setting provides a simplified context for theory-building and application not unlike the (supposedly) isolated, small-scale communities that inspired Malinowski, Boas, and Mead, among others. *LOST* thus becomes an entertaining proxy for ethnographic data, capturing student attention and providing a familiar, low-risk forum in which to experiment with the application of theory. Though the use of multiple media sources throughout the semester is recommended, *LOST*'s fictional characters and events can be comfortably employed to model a full range of theories – from unilineal evolutionism to cultural materialism and symbolic and interpretive anthropology – without the threat of reifying cultural stereotypes for existing populations.

Moreover, *LOST* can be easily edited to create brief segments for in-class viewing without sacrificing comprehension. Like most television series, *LOST* is designed to function as a set of independent episodes, such that students are able to understand the action in a single episode without reference to the larger series. Excluding commercials, the episodes run for approximately 45 minutes and combine a primary storyline with one or more character-driven subplots. Each episode thus yields multiple, 20-minute, stand-alone segments, which are compatible even with 50-minute-block course scheduling. The complete six-series collection is readily available for purchase from multiple retailers, video rental centers, and via online, instant streaming. It is also freely accessible on the ABC website. For this example, I focus on a 25-minute segment from "Confidence Man" – the eighth episode of the initial season – to explore competing theories of social formation proposed by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

*Theories of Social Formation in "Confidence Man" (05:45-29:45)*

Prior to introducing the clip, it is important to establish sufficient background. In my courses, students prepare by independently reading

annotated essays by Durkheim and Weber (see McGee and Warms 2008:82-127), and I outline the history and defining arguments for this school of thought at the start of class. Students are then divided into small, four-to-five-person groups to collaboratively construct mind maps – visual diagrams that employ groupings, branches, and spatial areas to emphasize connections and relationships within a body of information. Each group focuses on either Durkheim or Weber, identifies their assigned theorist’s driving questions, and then literally draws out the connections to relevant personal background, intellectual influences, and key vocabulary and concepts. Committing these ideas to paper in a large, visual format keeps students on task and allows me to quickly assess comprehension when supervising multiple groups. The students are told that they are about to see a social group in transition as the result of a cataclysmic event (i.e., the plane crash), and that they will need to analyze these changes from the perspective of their assigned theorist. This information serves to guide their mind-mapping efforts and frame the LOST viewing as a role-playing activity. It is thereby made explicit from the outset how course content (i.e., theories of social formation) is to be connected with the selected media example.

The profiled clip opens as Jack, the physician, dresses a head wound for Boone, while Boone’s step-sister, Shannon, sits in the background in clear distress. The ensuing dialogue between Jack and Boone introduces the major source of conflict in this episode as we learn in quick succession that: (1) Shannon suffers from asthma and her inhaler has recently run out, (2) Boone’s luggage held Shannon’s spare inhalers, and (3) Sawyer, a conman and the group outsider, has been spotted with some of Boone’s possessions, which he is believed to have taken, along with Shannon’s inhalers, from the plane wreckage. Boone’s initial attempt to retrieve the inhalers from Sawyer has resulted in a beating and the head wound we see in the opening shot. The selected clip follows the group’s attempts to take the inhalers from Sawyer and treat Shannon’s worsening asthma. Flashes of Sawyer’s pre-crash back-story punctuate the segment, which ultimately ends with a torture sequence in which Jack and former Iraqi Republican guardsman, Sayid, prevail on Sawyer to disclose the location of the inhalers. Sawyer withstands these brutalities and leverages his position to win a kiss from Kate – a love interest he shares with Jack. After receiving the kiss, Sawyer reveals that he never had the inhalers.

At the conclusion of the clip, students are led in a review of the segment’s main characters and their relationships to one another as a final

preparation for group work in which they develop an analysis from the perspective of their assigned theorist: Durkheim or Weber. I often float between the two groups during this time, posing questions and prompting further reflection. Each group assigns a leader to present their interpretation to the class as a whole, and the floor is opened up for debate after both sides have been heard. During the ensuing dialogue, the instructor functions largely to identify out-of-character remarks and consistently reinforce distinctions between the students' Weberian, Durkheimian, and personal readings. I aim to advance the following basic interpretations, which are achievable for students early in the semester and provide a solid grounding in the concept and application of theoretical frameworks.

### *The Durkheimian Analysis*

Following the plane crash, the LOST survivors must forge new interpersonal connections, ultimately creating a shared society with some degree of social cohesion. We can assume that in the days immediately following the crash, there was limited differentiation as the survivors defined themselves in relation to a single shared experience and were united through affective bonds rather than those of interdependence. Island life thus originally demonstrates mechanical solidarity. When we join the cast in this clip, however, we can see that occupational specialization is beginning to (re)emerge. It is Jack, the physician, who treats Boone's head wound. Sayid has begun to function as a technician and an enforcer, taking on the responsibility of torturing Sawyer for the good of the group. Locke, one of the more enigmatic characters, takes on the role of hunter, and there are attempts by several group members to define Sawyer as a thief. Durkheim would characterize the island society as transitioning into organic solidarity in keeping with his belief that societies evolve from simple, homogenous groups to more advanced, differentiated ones. Sawyer's refusal to turn over Shannon's inhalers (or even offer accurate information as to their whereabouts) can be seen as a violation of the assumed social facts of the group – the rules that an individual must learn and observe as a member of the society. Conflict, specifically Sawyer's torture at the hands of Jack and Sayid, can be seen as transient strife resulting from the "incomplete elaboration of organic solidarity" (McGee and Warms 2008:70).

### *The Weberian Analysis*

In contrast to Durkheim's optimistic view of social evolution, Weber saw a movement toward increasing bureaucratization, personal restrictions, and the destruction of individual liberties. Sawyer is Weber's archetypal hero. By remaining on the beach, opting out of Jack's "Commie share fest down in Cavetown," and successfully resisting the emerging power structure, Sawyer establishes himself as a charismatic individual whose actions are a form of social protest with the potential to radically redirect society. Even when bound and physically disadvantaged, he controls the situation to further his romantic aims with Kate, prompting debate over which characters have power as well as an apt segue into Weber's classic conception of power as "the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in that action" (McGee and Warms 2008:102). Shannon's inhalers can be read as the basis for a new class-consciousness when they emerge as "decisive for the fate of the individual" and thus sensitize others to Sawyer's hoarding and his control of property on the island (McGee and Warms 2008:104). While admittedly a simplification, it is an instructive one allowing the students insight into the development of basic class distinctions. Conflict is explained, per Weber, as the natural result of increasing class mobilization and the clash between two strongly charismatic individuals (Sawyer and Jack).

### *The Student Response*

In the most recent iteration of this activity, students (n=28) provided feedback in an anonymous survey with overwhelmingly positive results. The majority of participants reported improved comprehension in comparison to both previous reading and self-study (89.3%) and general group discussion (92.9%). Qualitative comments indicate that while students enjoy the opportunity to confer with their peers, these discussions quickly become unfocused without a shared set of accessible examples like those provided by the LOST storyline. Moreover, in keeping with previous findings (Bird and Godwin 2006, Shields and Kidd 1973, Vande Berg 1991), students prefer the use of relevant, contemporary media – often conceptualized as 'characters they know.' Yet while 89.3 percent would like to see the activity repeated with a different set of theories,

several urged that we move beyond LOST to incorporate other forms of media, thus echoing the third media selection guideline. Though most students were not quite willing to describe the experience as “pleasant,” they appreciated the active element as a means of “stimulating [the] brain in a way that sitting and listening could not.”

### **Saving Media**

Contemporary popular media cannot ‘save us’ or somehow transform our teaching into a uniquely modern endeavor. Neither should we fear or dismiss it as a ‘low brow’ cultural product. As evidenced earlier, perceptions of media-based instruction tend toward either utopian visions of the collaborative potential of evolving technologies or dystopic fears of eroding academic standards. The intent here is to prompt a movement away from this false dichotomy with a practical consideration of media as simply another device in the pedagogical toolkit.

For theory courses, film and television offer an efficient, low-cost, low-risk source of simulated, ethnographic data. Instructors compile brief clips from commercial film and television, which allow students to work together in-class to assess a variety of characters and events without the time investment of original fieldwork or the danger of reifying stereotypes for existing populations. I have profiled the television series, LOST, due to its compelling images; convenient replication of anthropology’s classic small-scale, bounded cultures; and my consistent success with this example early in the semester as an introduction to the technique. Yet LOST is only one of many possible examples. When used as a heuristic device rather than a means of conveying factual information, media selection is constrained only by three basic guidelines: (1) avoid ethnographic films and filmed lectures, (2) keep it brief, and (3) add variety. Conceived of as such, this technique bridges the gap between the abstract language of theory and students’ everyday worlds, providing a simplified, non-threatening forum for role-play and experimentation with multiple theoretical paradigms. Ultimately, it becomes a space for students to build the skills and confidence needed to address the nuance and complexities of real-life events.

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