Claudia Paganini

How to Find Meaning through Short Film Storytelling

A Response

Biography

Claudia Paganini studied philosophy and theology at the University of Innsbruck and the University of Vienna. After completing a doctorate in cultural philosophy in 2005, she turned to media ethics for her habilitation. Since April 2021 she has been Professor for Media Ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy, Germany.

Media changes do not occur from one moment to the next but are complex and long processes in which – between fascination, indignation, uncertainty, and curiosity – new habits concerning the use of the respective new medium gradually evolve. It is therefore not surprising that the medium *film* first had to replace the media *book* and *writing* as the leading medium[1] before film education gradually succeeded in becoming established in the teaching context. In recent years university teachers working with films have found that this medium has enabled them to achieve results they would not have been able to achieve otherwise, or with difficulty only. What is now pending is the scholarly reflection on why films do work in the classroom, what (exact) effects they have, where they can be an additional didactic tool, and where the limits of their application lie.

The contributions by Alexander D. Ornella, Stefanie Knauss, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Marie-Therese Mäder and Ken Derry take us one step along this path. They are similar in some ways, as they are all dedicated to film didactics, and more specifically to the use of short films within the context of university teaching in the fields of religious studies, ethics, and sociology. But they are also dissimilar in significant ways, for they address different genres of short film, different subject areas, and different didac-

1 Anders 2019, 21.

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tic concerns. Therefore, the five contributions will be discussed individually in the following response, which is guided by overarching questions that will help relate the individual contributions to each other: What do the authors consider the very character of the methods they use? What is the added value of short films? And, what do the students experience, learn, etc. that they would not have been able to learn otherwise?

Alexander D. Ornella begins his contribution with systematic reflections on the short film, in which he sees great potential, although this potential has hardly ever received due attention before. For him, short films are important means of communication in the classroom. Short films take place in one location and in a clearly limited time frame; they feature only a small set of characters and deal exclusively with one big problem or issue, which results in a dynamic that differs from that of long films and thus helps a group find a common focus. At this point, it would be exciting to compare the short film to the short story, which is seen as a pedagogically valuable bridge between classic and modern literature today and whose standing as a literary genre has increased, interestingly from the moment it became clear how well it could be used in the classroom.[2]

An important methodological assumption made by Ornella is that learning should be fun, and one cannot but agree, especially since brain research has shown that contents stored in connection with (positive) emotional states of mind can be remembered more easily and can even be recalled in situations of stress and exam anxiety. Since adolescence makes young people particularly vulnerable, the educational system should be more concerned with making learning an enjoyable experience. This raises the concern, however, that the pedagogical use of short films somehow deprives them of their original character, which is to provide purpose-free and artistic pleasure. I see an analogy here with current debates about so-called serious games, which are used increasingly and with considerable success in the classroom, while they are at the same time losing their characteristic of being a purpose-free activity outside the confining rules of what is termed reality.[3] How might it be possible to negotiate these contradictions in the classroom?

Ornella also discusses the peculiarities of science fiction shorts, which he highly appreciates and which – as is well known – do not deal strictly

2 Spinner 2014.

3 Paganini 2020, 97–106.

with the future, but also address the great questions of humankind that manifest themselves in the respective present in exactly the same way as they have done in the past and will do in the future. The parallels with religion are obvious here, as Ornella notes. Indeed, such parallels can be seen all across science fiction literature, as for example between the Star Wars saga (9 parts, various directors, US 1977–2019) and the Bible.[4] Not only do these two works have numerous analogies in terms of their protagonists, but they also express the longing of the human being to merge with the transcendent power, to find reconciliation in spite of broken relationships, and to choose the right path when faced with the constantly impending choice between good and evil.

Against this background, Ornella's thesis that science fiction shorts can serve to introduce specific issues dear to modern sociology and religious studies makes perfect sense. The male gaze, which Ornella explicitly mentions as an example, has already been amply discussed[5] and can de facto be discovered – and subsequently explored – in almost any cultural product, from the dating show on TV, when the camera lingers conspicuously long on the bosoms and buttocks of women, to television commercials and computer games, where male avatars attract attention by their armor and weapons, while female avatars do so by the amount of naked skin they show.

What seems most exciting to me, therefore, are the themes of exclusion and dehumanization which Ornella also raises. To illustrate how short films can function as conversation starters in this context, Ornella refers to the dialogue between Colonel Briggs and the sentient artificial human Basil in the short film Rise (David Karlak, US 2016, 5′). While Basil invokes humaneness and compassion, the Colonel remains entirely caught up in his brutal logic of exclusion: "We know how to unwelcome a species." In everyday life, mechanisms of exclusion and dehumanization take place regularly and more often than not we are not victims but perpetrators. This is exactly what renders the topic so sensitive. If we strive for an inclusive and peaceful society, we need to ask ourselves how we can allow for stories in which we are not the heroes. Possibly, exactly this is being achieved by the various alienation effects in science fiction short films and their outsourcing of interpersonal brutality to the human-robot relationship. It would be interesting to look

4 Paganini/Paganini 2022.

5 Kelly 2017, 451–455.

further into this subject matter and focus on the why, with answers possibly found in narrative psychotherapy, where clients are guided to better understand themselves and find meaning in their lives through storytelling.[6]

Ornella's contribution makes new and interesting observations and presents numerous issues in a clear and comprehensible way, and the text provides a solid basis for further discussion. One of the issues one might wish to pursue further concerns the ethical questions his text notes, albeit only briefly, for whose investigation one might draw on a well-developed and highly differentiated scientific discourse.

Stefanie Knauss also begins her contribution with basic considerations about the function of short films in university teaching. In particular, she points out the importance of making students aware of how films work, how they construct reality, and in what different ways they can be decoded. For Knauss, the advantages of short films are, very pragmatically, the fact that they can be both viewed and worked on together in a single teaching unit and that their open-endedness makes them well suited to stimulate discussion. At the same time, they offer the opportunity to inquire not only into concrete questions but also into the way these questions are being represented in the media.

The film The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23′) tells the story of a strictly observant Jewish Orthodox couple who are required by law to divorce after Rivke, Motl's wife, has been raped. While Motl does not explicitly oppose the law and side with his wife, he consults several rabbis, until he is finally given permission to take his wife back. In the end, Rivke has to decide, or has the right to decide, whether she wants to go back to her husband. The relationship between power and powerlessness is reversed, and the viewers understand that our assumptions about other cultures and religions often are highly schematic and superficial.

Knauss's article gives precise information about the setting of the lessons, how she works didactically, and what problems she has encountered. She admits that Yiddish (with subtitles) as the film's language and the dense structure of the short film make it difficult for students to relate and engage. At the same time, however, she reports from her experience that the short film does arouse the viewers' interest and thus makes the strange world of *haredi* Judaism more accessible to young people in an unobtrusive way.

6 Lucius-Hoene 2020, 629–647.

While reading Knauss's text one increasingly wishes to use The Cohen's Wife in class, but one also wishes to hear more about the learning outcomes. While at the beginning Knauss emphasizes the importance of preparing shorts didactically, at the end she seems to plead for not overloading the lessons – according to the motto "less is more" – and letting the film speak for itself: perhaps it might be possible to imagine these two approaches as complementary.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati devotes her contribution to the didactic use of the animated film A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6′). The short film shows the life of an average middle-class man in 1960s Italy, who basically rushes from one predetermined station – symbolized in the film by concrete blocks – to the next and who is finally mourned by a large crowd of uniform people at his funeral. However, in my reading of Pezzoli-Olgiati's analysis of the film, she too uncritically agrees with Bozzetto's representation of the nameless protagonist's uniform and unexciting life as unsatisfactory. Recent debates in media studies in regards to users' largely uniform self-portrayal on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have raised interesting questions that might inspire other readings of the film: what is actually bad about stereotypes?[7] Or: why does everyone always have to be special? This seems to me to be a philosophically exciting issue worth pursuing further.

Pezzoli-Olgiati's aim in the didactic use of the short is to familiarize students with the society of the time in which the texts discussed in class were written. She believes that this supports students' reading and understanding of complex theories of religion – such as those of Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Clifford Geertz, and Mary Douglas – which were written in cultural contexts with which students are not familiar. It would be interesting to further explore whether the animated short is really typical of the specific situation of the 1960s or whether it could also be interpreted as a more general critique of a non-conscious life – possibly in the vein of existentialism, as a critique of a way of life in which the human subject follows an externally imposed plan and fails to decide, to choose for oneself, to "set oneself".

Pezzoli-Olgiati's contribution highlights the benefits of working with the short film, but one might also wish to consider possible drawbacks. While, in the experience of the author, the short offers a "helpful way of

7 Lobinger 2009, 109–123.

introducing and contextualising dry and complex theoretical thinking about religion" (31), it is also important to be aware of the fact that the film may arouse negative emotions too, which might counter these intended positive effects. The life of the protagonist is heading towards death in such a straightforward and merciless way that this harsh confrontation with one's own finiteness may be overwhelming for students, all the more so because teaching takes place not in a protected environment but in an exposed situation. Future scholarly investigations of the advantages of using short films in class – also in the cases discussed by the other authors – will also benefit from the use of a control group to help determine whether the discussion would have proceeded in a significantly different way, had the short film not been used, or would have had a different quality or intensity.

Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution differs from the other contributions in two ways: first, the author discusses a documentary, 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22'), while the other contributions reference fiction films, and second, she deals primarily not with questions of the theory of religion but with questions of moral philosophy. She notes that besides developing abstract normative theories, it is crucial to provide answers to the question of motivation, especially since we live in a secular context without transcendental moral authority. Mäder thus asks how teaching can help students not only to understand, to generate knowledge, and to acquire differentiated points of view, but also to "come to act". In the history of philosophy, the need to deal with action motivation has been noted periodically, just as it has been overlooked for long periods of time. In this respect, Mäder's concern is important and possibly the time is now ripe for its sustained consideration, for following Martha Nussbaum's recent monograph,[8] there seems to be an increasing discussion in the philosophical scholarly community whether we need positive political emotions and how they can be aroused. An approach that stretches the personal experience of emotions through the use of film, as is suggested here, seems very relevant in this context, then.

Mäder's approach is to directly let students experience responsibility through the film and to analyze in a further step what responsibility consists of on the different levels of agency and with regard to different actors involved in the film's production and reception. Thus her contribution clearly shows the added value of using film in the classroom: talking about

8 Nussbaum 2021.

the men, women, and children drowning every day in the Mediterranean, right at the gates of Europe, does not trigger nearly as many emotions as the experience – equally impressive and oppressive – of watching the short documentary 4.1 Miles, which accompanies the captain of a coastguard ship stationed on the Greek island of Lesbos and shows how the crew manage to save some people from drowning in the Aegean Sea while failing to rescue others.

The camera's gaze is merciless, and therefore the practice described by Mäder of warning students in advance and giving them the opportunity to leave the classroom is certainly appropriate. However, the question arises: Is this enough? Do students have the competence to deal with such trigger warnings? As Mäder notes, it is important to develop a relationship and atmosphere of trust between student and instructor. But the classroom context with its clear hierarchy poses challenges in this regard. In a setting where performance is judged through grades, perhaps students do not feel free to accept the offer to leave the room and might think they had better watch the film so that they won't be "classified" as uninterested by their professor. Thus, the film and Mäder's reflections on teaching with it raise the important issue of power and hierarchies in teaching, which deserves further reflection.

Mäder's contribution also raises questions about feelings and emotions: a film like 4.1 Miles undeniably elicits strong feelings. But are they the right feelings and is it appropriate to provoke this dynamic through a film's discussion in the classroom? Are we entitled to override the victims' personal rights for didactic reasons? And: is the feeling aroused really a feeling of responsibility and not merely cheap voyeurism? These questions are currently the subject of intense scholarly debate,[9] especially in connection with war reporting. One could argue, for instance, that a peculiar complicity between camera and viewer develops, because at the very moment of viewing, the viewer – just like the cameraperson at the very moment of filming – does not take any action to change the terrible situation, but merely watches. Susan Sontag, who has won several awards for her work on the ethics of images, even goes so far as to claim that only those who actively do something about the injustice captured in images have the right to watch them.[10] Even if one holds that Sontag is going too far with her claims, it is an un-

9 Schicha 2021.

10 Sontag 2004.

resolved question whether consuming brutal and shocking film sequences really leads to an experience of responsibility and to engagement, and not instead to withdrawal. When we are emotionally overwhelmed by certain topics, we usually do not become active, but react passively, by fading out and stopping the discussion. Thus, as Mäder also highlights, the appropriate contextualization of the images is crucial. Still, the dynamics of the human psyche may be too complex and too unpredictable to be accounted for in a classroom setting, a concern that Mäder's text challenges us to consider further.

While her approach of contrasting abstract thinking about responsibility with experiencing it in a phenomenological approach is worthwhile, it is also important to analyze in a next step whether this approach really has a lasting effect on students' evaluations of ethically challenging situations and consequent actions.

The use of animated short films in the final exams for several of his courses in the study of religion is at the center of Ken Derry's contribution. His basic assumption in doing so is that the films help students be more relaxed during the sometimes stressful situation of being tested. This is particularly important, as Derry notes in reference to scholarship on pedagogy and trauma, in the current context of students being traumatized by the pandemic and its aftereffects. Derry's decision to use animated films is based on the advantage that they are usually brighter both in color and in tone or mood, so that the image is better visible in the (not always completely) dark classroom and the film helps in diffusing the stress of the exam situation. Obviously, the brightness of the image and of the film's story depends again on the type of animated film that is shown. For that reason, Derry primarily chooses Pixar productions, which are in fact often bright in terms of colors and grading.

For Derry, the reason for using short films (rather than clips of longer films) is that all the students have the same starting point, in having seen the whole film, whereas showing a clip from a feature film might create an advantage for those students who have already seen the film. In addition, it is not necessary to provide context when the film can be shown in its full length. Of course, it could also be the case that some students have already seen the short film and enjoy an advantage when they see it for a second time during the exam, but presumably that happens more rarely, given the modest distribution of short films. Another aspect that one might wish to consider when using short films in exams is that not all the students

have the same cognitive-emotional access to film. There might be students who are not audio-visually oriented at all. Not everybody has a "natural" approach to films and is so easily able to connect theories of religion with animated narratives, as Derry asks his students to do. This is particularly relevant because Derry does not convey film analytical tools in his classes, meaning that the students only have their pre-existing knowledge and language to rely on as they reflect on the films in the context of the theories they had studied.

In spite of these possible limitations of using short films in exams, which each instructor should carefully consider before choosing to do so, the sample exam responses that Derry includes in his essay provide evidence for the benefits of applying this exam method. Derry's contribution offers an instructive hands-on approach, with many useful short film examples and practical considerations about the technical, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of this exam method, and his reflections show how much can be achieved with engaged teaching.

All in all, the contributions gathered in this volume offer an exciting and rich introduction to the didactics of short films, which has received little attention so far. They also raise numerous questions and issues to be more fully explored in future investigations of this subject area.

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Filmography

4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22′).
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