

Bridging film education and philosophical practice: enhancing critical thinking and ethical reflection in young audiences

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Abstract: The article investigates the potential benefits of integrating philosophical practitioners into film education programs, particularly in enhancing students' critical thinking and broadening their educational experience. The study explores the synergy between film as a cultural medium and philosophy as a practice, arguing that films inherently possess a philosophical dimension that can be leveraged to deepen students' understanding of complex ethical and existential issues. By examining specific films from the CinEd collection, the article illustrates how philosophical inquiry can be effectively applied in educational settings to foster critical thinking, ethical reflection, and personal growth. The case study of the CinEd program provides a practical context for this integration, emphasizing the potential for philosophical practitioners to enhance the overall learning experience. The article concludes that incorporating philosophical practices into film education not only democratizes access to philosophical discourse but also promotes the development of critical thinking skills, ethical judgment, and an appreciation for diverse perspectives among young learners.

Key-words: Philosophical practice, film education, critical thinking, pedagogy, cinema;

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Preamble

This article explores the intersection between film education and philosophical practice, questioning whether film education programs might benefit from including philosophical practitioners as facilitators to enhance students' comprehension and broaden their educational experience. This inquiry arises from my extensive professional experience, particularly as the coordinator of the Romanian national branch of the European CinEd program. In this role, I have engaged intensively with student groups ranging from 5 to 19 years old across various educational contexts—within formal school settings, extracurricular clubs, and festival programs. CinEd's mission is to promote cinema as both a cultural medium and a tool for understanding the world. To this end, a unified pedagogical approach was developed, anchored in a curated collection of films produced by European partner countries (CinEd Whitebook 2020, p. 60). The question now emerges whether the existing tools and methodologies are sufficient for integrating film into formal education or if applying philosophical practices could further enrich the learning experience, mainly when working with young audiences. It is worth noting that many of the methods employed in film education inherently possess a philosophical dimension. For instance, critically examining the visual and thematic discourses embedded within a film's narrative can be viewed as a form of philosophical inquiry. Therefore, this article will address philosophical practitioners' potential contributions as facilitators in film education programs aimed at younger audiences. While the relevance of film as a tool in philosophical counselling and practice is acknowledged, it will not be the primary focus of this discussion. This article is written from the perspective of film education, aiming to bridge the gap between these two fields and examine the synergies that may arise from their integration.

Introduction

When attempting to define film education, it becomes evident that existing definitions carry varied implications for policy development, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches. In an attempt to define film education, the Film Education Framework for Europe, a collaborative effort involving 50 experts from organisations across Europe, outlined

three core dimensions of film education, each with distinct educational implications: The Creative, the Cultural and the Critical Dimension. These three dimensions are interrelated and are built upon the following experiences: experiencing film together in cinema halls, reflecting on national and global contexts, discovering historical films, appreciating film as an art form, and critically examining ideas and values (BFI 2014, p.8).

The creative dimension points to the importance of fostering an appreciation for film viewing and an understanding of the filmmaking process itself. Filmmaking is seen as a crucial pathway to comprehending its form and function. The educational focus here includes the film's technical specificities and the social, personal, and collaborative processes involved in its creation.

The cultural dimension refers to the critical and creative aspects that foster a broader film culture. The aim is to move beyond mere film viewing to understanding film's cultural and historical contexts. Educational focuses include the historical and institutional contexts of film and reflective learning practices (BFI 2014, pp.9-10).

The third dimension refers to the critical engagement with film, which involves the ability to explore and understand films in their full diversity. This dimension encourages continuous questioning regarding how films impact, challenge, and resonate with viewers. It represents a dialogue between the audience and the screen and between the filmmaker and the audience (BFI 2014, p.9). This Film Education Framework for Europe underscores the multifaceted nature of film education and highlights its potential to contribute significantly to broader educational goals by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness among learners. Film education has been shown to positively impact various aspects of learning. It can increase student engagement and motivation and even improve literacy skills through the analysis and creation of films (Film Education: A User's Guide 2024).

Film education practices encourage students to critically analyse films, exploring narratives, themes and underlying messages. Both film education and philosophical practice require the interpretation of meaning. Further, we will explore whether philosophical practitioners can add value to film education programs.

Philosophical practitioners as facilitators in film education programs

In his examination of doing philosophy through film, Damian Cox argues that film is a significant subject for philosophical investigation. He suggests that the narrative elements of the film provide philosophy with material such as scenarios, case studies, and hypotheses for analysis. By telling stories and making assertions, films offer content that can be critically assessed, positioning them as objects of direct philosophical scrutiny (Cox 2011). As an art form, film holds a unique and powerful capacity to explore a wide range of philosophical issues. Unlike many other mediums, the film can effectively question particular ethical viewpoints, probe the nature of personal identity, and engage with complex moral dilemmas in a manner that is both accessible and profound. The visual and narrative nature of film allows it to present these philosophical inquiries in ways that are aesthetically engaging, emotionally resonant, and intellectually stimulating (Cox 2011). Cox emphasises the unique power of film as an art form to delve into various philosophical issues. Not only are films an object for philosophical scrutiny, but they engage us philosophically as we watch them:

“After all, anything and everything can be an object of philosophical scrutiny (a table, a pen, a cloud, a cathedral). Usually, something becomes an object of philosophical scrutiny by representing a certain type of thing or a certain type of experience or phenomenon that philosophically puzzles and challenges us. Films become philosophical in a more interesting and thoroughgoing sense when they do more than this. They become philosophical by engaging us philosophically as we watch them.” (Cox 2011)

According to Cox, films do philosophy cinematically by capturing arguments in ways that resonate emotionally as well as intellectually. The emotional responses elicited by films can sharpen the viewer's focus, enabling them to appreciate aspects of an argument that might otherwise be overlooked. Therefore, an essential argument for including philosophical practitioners in film education is grounded in the non-elitist status of film as an art form. Unlike more traditional philosophical texts,

which may be less accessible to the general public, films are widely viewed and discussed by diverse audiences. This broad accessibility ensures that films can serve as a common cultural reference point where values, moral issues, and philosophical questions are presented, actively debated and analysed by various people (Cox 2011). Moreover, the film's engaging qualities make it a precious tool for introducing and discussing philosophical topics. Its ability to simultaneously captivate viewers emotionally and challenge them intellectually means that film can foster a more profound understanding and reflection on critical philosophical issues. Therefore, integrating philosophical inquiry into film education democratises access to philosophical discourse, making it more inclusive and relevant to contemporary audiences.

Philosophical practice, which emerged in Europe during the 1980s, redefines philosophy as a way of life rather than merely an academic discipline. Unlike analytical philosophy, which often remains confined within theoretical frameworks and is largely self-referential, philosophical practice emphasises applying philosophical thinking to real-world problems and everyday life. According to Marinoff, this approach has restored philosophy's "lost legitimacy" as a valuable means of exploring and understanding the world. In a rapidly evolving world, philosophical practice offers tools to navigate different challenges in ways that neither theology nor science can fully address (Marinoff, 2000). Philosophical practice represents a shift from a purely theoretical or hypothetical context towards a more practical and engaged form of philosophy that seeks to make philosophical inquiry relevant and accessible in contemporary contexts. By doing so, philosophical practice revitalises the original purpose of philosophy, which has historically been both practical and inherently oriented towards the betterment of human life (Marinoff, 2000). Philosophical practice is founded on the belief that formal education is not necessary to engage in philosophy. Doing your own philosophy involves actively evaluating the patterns in your thoughts and experiences and critically assessing your ideas to ensure that your philosophy supports your well-being rather than hinders it. As Marinoff puts it,

"We need to think critically, look for patterns and everything together into the big picture to make our way through life. Understanding our own philosophy can help prevent, resolve, or

manage many problems. Our philosophies can also underlie the problems we experience, so we must evaluate the ideas we hold to craft an outlook that works for us, not against us" (Marinoff, 2000).

While this practice can be pursued independently, without formal training or an academic background, the guidance of a practitioner can be highly beneficial for deeper reflection. A practitioner possesses the expertise and tools to aid in philosophical inquiry and navigating various dilemmas. They bridge academic philosophy and the broader public, making philosophical inquiry accessible to those without formal training. This approach helps to make philosophy tangible and relevant to real-world concerns. When defining the role of a philosophical practitioner, Marinoff notes that while many philosophical practitioners hold Ph. D.s, teach at universities, and publish specialised articles, their work extends beyond traditional academic philosophy. These practitioners apply philosophical concepts to real-life personal, social, and professional challenges through personal counselling, group facilitation, and organisational consulting (Marinoff 2000). In practice, they help clients explore relevant philosophical ideas that apply to the issues at hand, focusing on those most relatable to the individual's situation. Philosophical practitioners guide their clients through identifying and understanding the components and implications of their problems. Through dialogue, they assist clients in finding the best solutions—solutions that align with the client's belief system while also resonating with time-honoured philosophical principles that support a more virtuous and effective life. Marinoff reflects the role of philosophy as a tool for living, accessible to all and applicable to the challenges people face:

"Philosophy is coming back into the light of day, where ordinary people can understand and apply it. Timeless insights into the human condition are accessible to you. We philosophical practitioners take them off the musty library shelf, dust them off, and put them into your hands. You can learn to use them. No experience necessary." (Marinoff, 2000)

The APPA (American Philosophical Practitioners Association) lists 177 practitioners worldwide, offering a range of certification, diploma, and

professional programs in philosophical counselling. These programs cover various aspects of philosophical practice, including philosophical counselling, group facilitation through Socratic dialogue, and organizational consulting focusing on dilemma training. The database of practitioners includes those who offer individual consultations, facilitate various groups, and provide consulting services to organizations. Some practitioners specialize in one area, while others are involved in multiple activities.

In the United States, the NPCA (National Philosophical Counseling Association, formerly the American Society for Philosophy) recognizes two types of philosophical practitioners: philosophical counselors and philosophical consultants. To be certified by the NPCA, a philosophical counselor must hold a master's degree in a mental health field from a graduate program. These counselors apply their philosophical training to a variety of mental health disorders typically treated by licensed mental health professionals. Philosophical consultants, on the other hand, must have at least a master's degree in philosophy from a graduate program. Unlike counselors, they do not address mental health disorders but instead help clients navigate various issues such as moral dilemmas, value conflicts, workplace relationships, motivation, procrastination, parenting challenges, and family or relationship problems. They focus on examining reasoning, teaching critical thinking skills, and offering philosophical perspectives.

In Romania, two master's programs in Timișoara and Bucharest provide training in philosophical practice, open to all higher education graduates regardless of their undergraduate specialization. A postgraduate program is beneficial in enhancing the competencies of future practitioners.

The training programs at the Institute of Philosophical Practices outline essential competencies for practitioners to master in both individual and group settings. These include following a logical approach, exercising critical thinking, analyzing client behavior and responses, identifying presuppositions in statements, forming strong arguments, understanding philosophical texts, questioning clients using a Socratic approach, distinguishing between objective and subjective reflection, conceptualizing ideas, and practicing paradigm flexibility. The Institute de Pratiques Philosophiques mentions there is no fundamental difference

between engaging in philosophy with children and with adults. Philosophizing should be integrated in pedagogical practice and not viewed as a separate field of inquiry (Institute de Pratiques Philosophiques, 2018).

Next, we will explore the CinEd program to examine how collaboration with a philosophical practitioner could enhance the program. We will also provide examples of films that could serve as valuable resources for philosophical inquiry.

CinEd- a case study

The CinEd project, supported by the Creative Europe / MEDIA programme, was established to address the need for film education on a European scale. Its goal is to enable young Europeans, both in and out of school, to explore the richness and diversity of European filmmaking while developing critical thinking skills and knowledge of cinema techniques and language. This strategic and structured programme targets children and young adults in Europe aged 6 to 19 and offers a comprehensive film education experience that includes: a common digital platform, a collection of classic European films and contemporary authors selected by the program's partners, an original teaching approach that is progressive and adapted to non-specialists, priority given to multilingualism, – training for teachers, educators, instructors and tutors, – public screenings followed by educational and creative activities with young viewers (CinEd Whitebook, 2020, p. 61).

The collection features 25 film programs, including films, documentaries, and short-film programs. These films were selected by each represented country as emblematic of their film cultures. They portray children and young people forming their identities, exploring their surroundings, or making their initial choices as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The films possess an initiatory quality, capturing the essence of these developmental stages. While the films examine and place their characters in specific locations and times, they transcend these confines by exploring common themes such as history, European values, and artistic movements that have shaped and continue to shape the continent (CinEd Whitebook, 69). Additionally, the films reflect significant moments in European history: the socio-cultural upheavals of the past 50

years, post-war reconstruction and societal transformation (e.g., *Il Posto* by Ermanno Olmi); the post-communist transition (e.g., *The Way I Spent the End of the World* by Cătălin Mitulescu, *The Happiest Girl in the World* by Radu Jude, *Shelter* by Dragomir Sholev); the ideological questioning of the late 1960s (e.g., *Pierrot le Fou* by Jean-Luc Godard); and recent urban "modernisation" processes (e.g., *En construcción* by José Luis Guerín).

A common teaching approach was developed based on the collection of films produced. The open-access resources provide a flexible framework, including pedagogical booklets, student sheets, thematic videos, and an interactive map. These resources invite users to explore the film collection through various pedagogical steps: describing a photogram, a shot, or a sequence; extracting and selecting images; classifying, comparing, and contrasting them; and tracing similarities between different art forms. The booklets developed for each film follow a consistent structure. They cover the film's relevance for young audiences, information about the director and their filmography, the socio-historical context, analysis examples of relevant photograms, shots, and sequences, connections between the film and other films or arts, and suggestions for pedagogical activities before and after viewing the film.

CinEd pedagogy emphasizes collective film viewing and extends learning through practical or analytical exercises. Typically, CinEd activities are led by teachers, film professionals, art students, or art historians. The framework allows for adaptation to various settings and audiences. Initially developed to encourage teachers to integrate film into the classroom, the program in Romania has faced challenges. Teachers are often overworked, school curricula are dense, and such activities need to be financially reimbursed, leading to some resistance to adopting new tools. We have had successful experiences facilitating film education in national project weeks ("Școala Altfel" and "Săptămâna Verde"). Since coordinating CinEd in Romania (2020), we have benefited from the expertise of various facilitators. Collaborating with historians provided a context-based approach, visual artists or film professionals offered an artistic perspective, and a psychoanalyst facilitated personal discussions about the parent-child relationship. Overall, we found that working with diverse facilitators enhances the pedagogical process. However, despite the richness of the materials and their open pedagogical approach, there is

a lack of deeper philosophical engagement, with a stronger focus on visual language, historical context, and connections to other arts.

Incorporating philosophical practitioners as facilitators could significantly enhance the CinEd program's overall experience and learning outcomes. Integrating philosophical practice into film education involves applying philosophical inquiry and methods to the study and analysis of films. This approach deepens students' understanding of films and fosters critical thinking, ethical reflection, and personal growth.

The critical dimension of film education hinges on the ability to analyse how films present arguments and viewpoints about the world. Facilitators play a crucial role in this process by posing insightful questions and guiding discussions. Philosophical practitioners can leverage their expertise to enrich film education by facilitating self-reflection, encouraging critical thinking, and mediating between diverse perspectives. This method helps students engage with films more profoundly, exploring not just their content but also their broader implications and connections to philosophical themes.

The films in the CinEd collection can serve as valuable tools for facilitating deep philosophical discussions. They frequently present complex ethical dilemmas, existential questions, and diverse perspectives on life, making them ideal starting points for philosophical inquiry. For example, the film *Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*) offers a profound opportunity for exploration. Set in post-Civil War Spain, the film follows a young girl named Ana, whose fascination with the film *Frankenstein* symbolises her struggle with concepts of life, death, and the unknown. *Spirit of the Beehive* delves into the blurred boundaries between reality and imagination, suggesting that imagination is not merely an escape from reality but a means of making sense of it. Ana's journey throughout the film can be interpreted as a metaphor for the human quest for meaning in a world of ambiguity and uncertainty. By examining Ana's experiences and the symbolic elements of the film, viewers can engage in rich philosophical discussions about the nature of reality, the role of imagination, and the search for existential meaning.

Films offer vivid narratives that can be explored to understand ethical principles. Philosophical practitioners can guide students in analyzing characters' decisions and the consequences of those decisions, providing a practical and relatable context for studying ethics. For

example, the film *El Verdugo* (*The Executioner*) echoes Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," which she famously explored in her writings on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. In *El Verdugo*, the protagonist, José Luis, is an undertaker coerced into becoming an executioner—a role he initially abhors. As he becomes entangled in the bureaucratic system and succumbs to societal pressures, he gradually accepts the position despite his moral reservations. The film illustrates how ordinary individuals can become complicit in atrocities not out of fanaticism but through apathy, conformity, and a desire for security. This portrayal profoundly explores how ethical compromise can occur in everyday life. It is a compelling basis for discussing Arendt's insights on the nature of evil and moral responsibility.

In collaboration with film educators, philosophical practitioners can assist students in developing critical thinking skills by analysing the underlying messages, biases, and ideologies present in films. This involves questioning the filmmaker's perspective, the historical and cultural context of the film, and how these elements influence the narrative. For instance, the film *Il Posto* explores themes of conformity, loss of individuality, and disillusionment with the working world. It follows the protagonist, Domenico, as he navigates a corporate job's cold, impersonal environment. The film vividly portrays the alienating nature of modern work environments, where individuals are reduced to mere cogs in a machine, losing their identity in the process. The monotonous, repetitive tasks and the bureaucratic procedures depicted in *Il Posto* reflect a sense of dehumanization that resonates with existentialist and Marxist critiques of capitalist society. By examining these themes, students can engage in a deeper analysis of how films address issues of personal identity, societal norms, and the impact of economic systems on human lives.

Philosophical practitioners can enhance the CinEd program by facilitating structured discussions and reflections following film screenings. They encourage students to express their views, consider alternative perspectives, and engage in respectful dialogue. The films in the CinEd collection address crucial themes related to inclusion and diversity, offering opportunities to stimulate empathy by presenting new perspectives and representing marginalized groups. For example, *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, delves into themes of identity, alienation, and social prejudice. The film examines how

societal norms and prejudices shape human relationships, particularly regarding race, age, and class. Through discussions complementing the screenings, students can be encouraged to analyze these themes critically, relate the realities depicted in the film to their own lives, and promote tolerance-related values.

An essential component of the CinEd program is its teacher training initiatives, which aim to promote film as an educational tool in the classroom. Open-access pedagogical resources have been developed to support this goal, and training programs are offered to make these resources more accessible to educators. Philosophical practitioners could contribute significantly to these training programs by presenting critical thinking exercises, methods for developing open-ended questions that stimulate deeper reflection, and techniques for fostering a more profound engagement with film content. Integrating philosophical practice into teacher training could enhance the effectiveness of film-based education and promote more meaningful learning experiences for students.

Conclusions

Film can be a crucial tool for philosophising with a young audience. Not only is it an accessible medium, but it also provides material to explore certain concepts and theories. Films encourage critical thinking by prompting students to delve deeply and systematically into various topics. They help students develop a more holistic understanding of film and introduce them to philosophical inquiry, making films a gateway to exploring complex ideas. Philosophical practitioners bring several key elements to this educational process:

1. Knowledge of philosophical concepts, theories, and texts.
2. The ability to translate these concepts into terms accessible to unfamiliar audiences.
3. Expertise in leading dialogues, asking relevant questions, and guiding discussions.

These skills make philosophical practitioners excellent facilitators for film education. They bring philosophy closer to a general audience and foster the development of future citizens equipped with critical thinking skills, ethical judgment, and an understanding of moral decision-making.

This form of inquiry encourages creative thinking, moving beyond standardised thought processes often emphasised in traditional school settings. Additionally, philosophical practice and film education promote democratic values through the following approaches: freedom of thought, opinion, and expression, and respect for human dignity. By critically questioning established thought patterns, considering diverse perspectives, and engaging in dialogue respecting others' positions, students develop competencies crucial for education, professional life, and active participation in society. These skills can be transferred to other forms of communication, such as civic engagement and active citizenship. Expressing diverse opinions and ideas positively impacts diversity, tolerance, and dialogue.

Exercises in critical thinking, imagination, and reflection encourage participants to develop a broad understanding of history and cultivate a critical spirit and autonomy of thought. The topics discussed can lay the groundwork for engaging in classroom discussions with teachers or conversations at home with parents. Integrating film education methods with philosophical analysis creates an interdisciplinary approach that intersects film education, history, art history, and philosophy. At the heart of this approach is the film itself, which serves both as an artistic medium and as a critical tool for knowledge. This method allows young viewers, teachers, and tutors to fully explore and appreciate the world of cinema.

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