

# Editorial

## Teaching with Short Films

This issue's thematic focus on teaching religious studies and ethics through short films originated in a conversation among the editors of this journal about our use of film in the university classroom: how do we pedagogically engage films, how do our research interests shape or enrich our pedagogical practices, or how is our scholarly engagement with film challenged by our teaching experiences? And how, in our pedagogy, do we take into account the particular logic of film, and especially the short film, as an audio-visual medium? Our decision to focus this conversation on our use of short films was motivated, as will become clear, by much the same rationale as is behind the use of short films in the classroom itself: their brevity allowed us to preview the material before our discussion so that we all shared the same point of departure, and the format of the short film encouraged focused reflection.

Following our discussions, several of us then agreed to develop our brief presentations of best practices and pedagogical challenges into more substantial reflections, which we present in this thematic section together with the additional contribution by Ken Derry. We solicited the response of a specialist in media ethics and cultural philosophy, Claudia Paganini, in the hope that this outsider perspective will enable us to better understand the particular benefits and limitations of using short film in the religious studies and ethics classroom. We hope that the contributions collected here will encourage reflection on the pedagogy of short films and provide both theoretical and practical suggestions for those of us teaching religion, theology, or ethics with the help of film.

It often seems as if films – short or long, fiction or documentary – are used in a somewhat haphazard fashion in teaching. When a film is scheduled, students might suspect that the instructor does not want to put much time or effort into preparing the session – and sometimes their hunch is valid. Start the film, and let *it* do the work of teaching. But this assumption is both right and wrong. It is right because, as Ladislaus Semali states with

regard to media more broadly, “[t]he media are powerful teachers”.<sup>1</sup> Since our students live in a world of images, the (audio-)visual format is often more accessible (and very likely more attractive) to them than written texts. Films encourage emotional and affective reactions and can contextualize the abstract theories and concepts introduced in a course through an audio-visual narrative depicting concrete places, people, and events. John Sundquist notes – with reference to language learning, but the same is also true with regard to teaching the study of religion and ethics – that films “provide instructors with new opportunities to engage their students in interactive communication, critical thinking, and intercultural learning”.<sup>2</sup>

However, films can also be quite ineffective teachers when they are used in class without introducing students to the theories, concepts, and tools of media and film studies: What is the relationship between reality and representation? How do production, the film itself, and its viewers with their respective contexts interact in the meaning-making process? Thus, the impression that teaching with film is easy teaching is quite wrong. The critical analysis of visual media is as demanding as that of written texts, and perhaps even more so, because their means of communicating first have to be brought to critical consciousness. Thus, as Belinha de Abreu notes, teaching with media also requires teaching about media:<sup>3</sup> how media function, how their messages are constructed, how their specific language works, who produced them, how they can be decoded in different ways, what values they include, or exclude, and why they are produced.<sup>4</sup> These are questions which need to be discussed when working with media, and they help students develop their skills of critical thinking and media literacy.<sup>5</sup>

## What Is a Short Film?

In general, scholarship on the pedagogy of film in the study of religion or ethics – underdeveloped as it is<sup>6</sup> – focuses on teaching feature length films (documentary or fiction), reflecting “the hammerlock that the feature

1 Semali 2005, 35.

2 Sundquist 2010, 123.

3 De Abreu 2019, 32.

4 De Abreu 2019, 18.

5 De Abreu defines media literacy as “the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms”. De Abreu 2019, 25.

6 For helpful reflections on teaching religion and/through film, see Watkins 2008; Hamner 2013.

length film holds, not only over film commerce, but over film theory and film history”.<sup>7</sup> Feature films are probably also formative of most people’s own cinematic experience and thus shape their expectations about how stories are told in an audio-visual format and how they should be analyzed. We suspect that even when instructors and students encounter short films in a class, they probably, implicitly or explicitly, draw on their theoretical and experiential knowledge of feature length films to make sense of what they see.

So what, then, is a short film, and what are the particular qualities of short films that need to be considered in order to engage them productively in the classroom? Alexander D. Ornella’s contribution to this issue shows that these questions are not as easy to answer as it might seem. An overview of the theory of short film results in two noteworthy observations: first, short films are primarily discussed within the context of teaching the practice of filmmaking, given that in many film schools students produce a short film for graduation.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, in both film theory and the industry, short films are considered an exercise<sup>9</sup> or sample piece through which young filmmakers showcase their talents in order to be considered as directors and attract funding for feature films. That is, short films are primarily seen as a means to an end, a first step in a career whose goal is the feature film.

And second, it seems difficult to define what a short film is, precisely, and what its characteristic qualities are. The most obvious quality is its length: a short film is, well, short. But even this characteristic leaves room for a lot of variation, with the term “short film” describing, for different authors or institutions, anything from a film of a couple of minutes to one of up to 40 or even 60 minutes.<sup>10</sup> Duration as the distinctive characteristic of a short film, however, means more than simply thinking of short films as short feature films. Michael Sergi and Craig Batty attempt to capture the similarities and differences between short films and feature films through the comparison between a motorbike and a car: while short and feature films share some

7 Gunning 2015, 66.

8 See for example Raskin 1998; 2006; 2014; Yeatman 1998; Sergi/Batty 2019. Raskin notes that in Scandinavian countries, graduation films, the so-called *novellefilm*, represent a particular subtype of short film. Raskin 2014, 29.

9 Kremski 2005a, 9.

10 Sundquist 2010. Sergi/Batty (2019, 54) introduce Daniel Gurskis’s typology, which distinguishes between short shorts (2–4 minutes), conventional shorts (up to 12 minutes), medium shorts (up to 25 minutes), and long shorts (30 minutes). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences defines a short film as a film with a running time of less than 40 minutes including credits (see <https://is.gd/SN7xpA>, accessed 7 May 2022).

similarities, they are also quite different from each other, both in terms of their structural elements and in how they are experienced.<sup>11</sup> Richard Raskin thus concludes with regard to the narrative dimension of short films, “[a]s an art form in its own right, the short film should not be subjected to sequential narrative models that have been designed for describing feature film storytelling.”<sup>12</sup>

While it seems difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is that makes short films different from feature films, a few aspects appear relevant across the reflections of both film theorists and film practitioners. One aspect is that the brevity of short films is recognized as more than simply a quantitative measure. Instead, the film’s short duration requires a qualitatively different form of filmmaking: “In the short film, the issue is not to shorten something but to condense it”, as filmmaker Kornél Mundruczó puts it.<sup>13</sup> Thus the brief(er) duration of short films reflects, according to Tom Gunning, a different “temporality”, with focus on the vertical, in-depth exploration of the moment rather than the horizontal forward momentum of the plot development of a feature film, resulting in different narrative constructions, forms of storytelling, and viewer experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Thus central to the short film form is the need for focus, condensation, and limitation of both the thematic scope and the cast of characters in order to enable viewers to understand quickly what the problem is, to capture and hold their attention, and to leave them with a meaningful experience. Raskin argues that while for feature films, character development, conflict, and dialogue are indispensable aspects of storytelling, these are optional for short films, which may successfully function without a central conflict, or focus on a moment in a character’s life rather than their development, or tell their story without dialogue.<sup>15</sup> Instead, he suggests that short film storytelling is successful when it achieves a dynamic balance between (at least some of) a set of seven paired principles: character focus – character interaction; causality – choice; consistency – surprise; sound – image; character – object; simplicity – depth; economy – wholeness.<sup>16</sup> Sergi and Batty

11 Sergi/Batty 2019, 52.

12 Raskin 2014, 33.

13 Kremksi 2005b, 166: “Im Kurzfilm geht es nicht darum, etwas zu verkürzen, sondern zu verdichten” (our translation).

14 Gunning 2015, 66.

15 Raskin 2014, 30–31.

16 Raskin 2014, 32–33.

propose a different but compatible set of basic principles of a good short film, namely the focus on one location, one time frame, a small cast of contrasting characters, and a single problem with immediate consequences for the characters.<sup>17</sup> What both Raskin's and Sergi / Batty's models of good short films underline is the importance of focus and clarity while at the same time allowing for openness and surprise: the brevity of the film, in fact, often requires gaps, symbolic objects, showing rather than telling, or concluding with an open ending, all of which allow for multiple interpretations and encourage the viewer's engagement with the film.<sup>18</sup>

These characteristic elements of the short film's form and experience – focus on the moment, condensation of narrative, symbolic communication, and viewer engagement – make it particularly suitable for exploration from the perspective of the study of religion, theology, and ethics. On the formal level, the short film's need to draw on symbolic elements to communicate economically while at the same time leaving space for viewers to find multiple meanings encourages the use of religious motifs and symbols that are broadly available in the cultural imaginary of the producers and viewers. In addition, given a certain bias against religions and religious figures noticeable in mostly secularized western societies and their media, a film's focus on religious characters or problems arising from religious worldviews or normative systems can serve to create tension among characters and their viewpoints that drives the short narrative. References to religious worldviews can provide a helpful frame to represent the characters' motivations, reactions, or attitudes towards the central problem of the short film and to create a dynamic narrative with different possible outcomes. Taking a step back, the importance of attention to religious worldviews, norms, and values is also relevant when thinking about viewers' diverse reactions to a film and their interpretations of it, which might equally be shaped by their religious or secular backgrounds and the values promoted through them. The analysis of the film's interaction with the viewers set in their respective cultural contexts allows tracing “the cultural work of religion”<sup>19</sup> in establishing or affirming norms and ideological positions and providing structures for individual and collective meaning-making.

17 Sergi/Batty 2019, 55–56.

18 Riis 1998.

19 Margaret Miles, quoted in Hamner 2013, 1143, footnote 3.

## Teaching Short Films

Teaching through short films offers a range of possibilities that follow from its particular formal qualities. The form of the short film, marked by “brevity, innovation, compact storytelling, and open-endedness”,<sup>20</sup> highlights the constructedness of audio-visual media and thus offers the opportunity to engage in close analysis of that form in addition to the themes addressed through it. This allows for teaching critical media literacy, where students learn to view media critically, pay attention to “how” a film communicates, not only “what” it shows, and ask about the interests that shape particular forms of representation and the meanings thus conveyed. With regard to religion or ethics, that might involve the analysis of positive or negative representations of particular religious characters or practices and how these reflect or challenge social prejudices. The film’s polysemic form of often symbolic communication further encourages students to seek out multiple interpretations and self-reflectively understand the importance of their own life experiences in shaping their “reading” of a film. On the level of plot or content, given the film’s brief duration, the necessary simplification and condensation of the narrative results in a clarity of exposition of the problem addressed that helps students see its various aspects clearly and analyze their relationship or consequences.

And not least, on a practical and experiential level, the shorter duration of the film (although as mentioned, length can vary considerably) has the advantage that it is possible to discuss a film in a single class session, viewing the film either together in class or asking students to watch it beforehand (or both). While often the students do not remember all the details of a film if they watched it as preparation for the class at home, re-viewing it in class means that they will now remember more – or different – details, whereas those who could not view it at home at least see it once in class. In addition, viewing the film together creates a particular experience of community and shared participation in the film’s world that provides the basis for discussion. Furthermore, before the film is viewed in class, the instructor can provide additional guidance for the reception of the film by, for example, asking students to focus on one specific character, on a filmic parameter like sound, camera movement or on the perspective from which

20 Sundquist 2010, 129.

the story is told, or simply but importantly, to consider how the second screening impacted them, what they see now or overlooked the first time. Through this experience students learn how important it is to know a source in detail before analyzing it, and just how unreliable one's memory of a film's details can be.

Focusing on feature length films, William L. Blizek and Michele Desmarais discuss four ways to use film in teaching "religion and film". They differentiate between using religion as a matrix to (1) interpret films, and using films to (2) critique or (3) promote religion or (4) cultural values.<sup>21</sup> They also differentiate between using film to promote religious practices (what they call "the religious study" of film and religion) and using film to promote the critical analysis of a religion as it also occurs in the university classroom (what Blizek and Desmarais call "the academic study of this field");<sup>22</sup> it is the latter approach that all contributions in this issue focus on. While this distinction between academic and religious study of films might not always be easy to make – especially when attending to the individual viewing experience – it is important to acknowledge that students and instructors might be believers, atheists, agnostics, or hold particular values. Thus it is crucial to critically reflect the spectators' position in the hermeneutical process.

One of the challenges in teaching short films is the knowledge divide between the instructor, who knows the film well and has perhaps also taught it before and thus has certain expectations about what students should take away from it, and the students, who view the film for the first time and for whose subjective experience the instructor also wants to make space, so that the viewing can be productive for them. How can the students appropriate the experience of watching a film and become active recipients of a narrative so that it is of concern to themselves and they are able to critically reflect on their viewing experience? Understanding one's own reception as subjective and then being able to analyze it in relation to the film's form and narrative as well as comparing it to other interpretations is the starting point for the critical discussion of questions of theology, ethics, or the study of religion in relation to the film. In order for this interpretative process to occur, instructors depend on the students' willingness to expose themselves to the film, and the instructors themselves need to step back from their position of knowledge to create the space for the students to experience the film themselves.

21 Blizek/Desmarais 2008, 17.

22 Blizek/Desmarais 2008, 30–31.

## Different Approaches to Short Film in Teaching the Study of Religion and Ethics

The current issue presents five different approaches to the many ways in which short films can be used in the classroom, including their strengths with regard to particular pedagogical objectives and also some of the challenges in teaching with short film. Daria Pezzoli Olgiati focuses on how theories of religion can be introduced by means of the short film *A LIFE IN A TIN* (*UNA VITA IN SCATOLA*, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6'). Pezzoli-Olgiati argues that using a film that portrays life in the 1960s contextualizes and makes accessible complex theories of religion that were developed during this period, such as those of Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Luckman, and Peter Berger. In her experience of teaching with the film, the animated narrative visualizes these complex theories in a way that makes them more accessible than the often-complicated texts.

Stefanie Knauss highlights attending to the stylistic parameters of a film in her teaching with the short *THE COHEN'S WIFE* (*ESHET KOHEN*, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23'). She encourages critical film analysis to improve the students' ability to understand how the film communicates issues of gender, power, and religion. Thus, while students may learn about strictly Orthodox Judaism through the film by seeing characters engaging in specific practices, hearing them speak Yiddish, or learning about Jewish traditions, they are also aware that these representations of Judaism are constructions and require critical reflection.

Opening with reflections on the genre and form of short film, Alexander D. Ornella's contribution then makes a case for science fiction short films as a focus for discussion of how processes of othering are visualized and how inclusion and exclusion work in society. The short films viewed in class allow the students to experience how processes of othering, inclusion, and exclusion are set in motion as the filmic narrative "translates" abstract concepts and theories into image and sound. He notes the benefits of working with film that addresses emotional and sensory as well as cognitive dimensions in the viewer.

Ken Derry's contribution reflects on his use of short films in exams. He observes that students are less nervous when they can watch a short film and answer questions related to it. Here, short films become a pedagogical and psychological tool in the classroom. Films without specific religious



references serve as an occasion for students to apply previously studied theories of religion, reflecting Blizek and Desmarais's category of using religion as a matrix to interpret films. Derry also uses films with explicit religious content for exams in courses focusing on particular religious traditions, asking students to reflect on theories about these traditions.

The emotional dimension is also highlighted in Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution. She discusses the short film *4.1 MILES* (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22') to consider the central concept of responsibility in media ethics. Her phenomenological approach to teaching requires students to be actively involved in the reception and to develop empathy for the social actors involved. Her aim is to provide a "lived experience" through the short film in order to be able to reflect on and formulate the ethical questions the film raises. Thus responsibility is experienced during the film reception as an emotion, namely empathy, and becomes a formative element in the three steps of description, analysis, and interpretation of the film.

Claudia Paganini's response to the articles notes the importance of substantial reflection on why films do work in the classroom, what effects they have, where they can be a constructive didactic tool, and where the limits of their application lie. Highlighting relevant points that each article makes, Paganini also raises questions and offers directions for further considerations that can contribute to future investigations in this field.

The five contributions and response gathered here show that short films are a helpful pedagogical tool and facilitate the communication process between instructors and students. Thus, the short films become a link between the instructor's teaching objectives and the students' openness and willingness to engage in the learning experience. We hope that the authors' reflections on their own experiences in the practice of teaching these films in dialogue with the theories of short film, pedagogy, and religion or ethics may provide a helpful stimulus to others engaging film in their classrooms.

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## Filmography

- 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22').
- A LIFE IN A TIN (UNA VITA IN SCATOLA, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6').
- THE COHEN'S WIFE (ESHET KOHEN, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23').