

# Bildung through films: How to discuss existential questions in academia

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## Abstract

Much has been written on the future of the academy within Europe. Raising questions about the ongoing aims of the university, critical authors have argued in favour of old but sometimes forgotten values such as 'critical thinking' and 'Bildung'. Joining such voices, this paper argues that one way to achieve the ideal of *Bildung* is through the use of films with 'existential themes', such as Rolando Colla's film *7 Giorni (7 Days, 2016)*. I explore how films may contribute to the realization of the ideal of *Bildung*, and how an education based upon such films might be constructed. In doing so, I refer to the work of Paul Ricoeur on the 'hermeneutical arc', and apply the method of 'moral case deliberation' in interpreting the existential dimensions in film. Ultimately, I hope this article will serve to assist other university lecturers in exploring how *Bildung* may be realized in higher education settings through watching and analysing films.

**Keywords:** *Bildung*; narrative understanding; narrative rationality; moral case deliberation; dialogue

No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls.

Ingmar Bergman

Recently, a number of books and articles have been written on the future of the academy, reflecting what some have seen as a generalized scepticism regarding the role and value of universities today. The contemporary European university is expected to contribute to economic growth and thus pursue a complex policy dictated by budget cycles and measurable output statistics, such as student numbers, students' results, PhD defences and articles published. Due to economic constraints and academic vocation, universities must balance management and accountability with scholarly autonomy and their ongoing responsibilities to wider society. Such developments raise the fundamental question, 'What are universities for?' (see, for example, Tuchman, 2009; Radder, 2010; Arum and Roksa, 2011; Collini, 2012; Flikkema, 2016), motivating critical authors to argue in favour of old but sometimes forgotten assets such as '*Bildung*', 'ethical awareness', 'identity formation' and 'academic freedom' (for example, Bilgrami and Cole, 2015).

In line with such perspectives, my focus here is on the question of *how* such values may be realized in higher education. I offer some suggestions concerning the way in which the ideal of *Bildung* may be discussed in regard to contemporary academic education. Traditionally, *Bildung* is understood as the development of a personal and academic identity, aimed at offering meaningful contributions to society through an encounter with difference and a dialogue with other people (see Hohendorf, 1993). In the following section, I explore the concept of *Bildung* from a historical perspective,

before going on to discuss how films may contribute to its development. I argue, with reference to the work of Paul Ricoeur, that films with 'existential themes' invite viewers to think about their film experience and that, if we are to realize the ideal of *Bildung* in education, our aim must be to render explicit these aspects of reflection. Finally, I formulate a proposal as to how one might construct educational programmes around such existential experiences, based on a structured method of conversation, 'moral case deliberation', facilitated by a moderator and originally used in the context of medical ethics.

I am not the first to propose the use of film for educational purposes. Resources and practical guides can easily be found (for example, Film Education, 2018; Barrance, 2010), and theoretical texts on the potentials, possibilities and problems of bringing film into a diverse spectrum of educational settings are also readily available (for example, Bergala, 2016; *Film Education Journal* 1:1). More often than not, however, these texts pursue a focus on primary and secondary education, and as such have little relevance for higher education. While the question of whether films should be studied at university has been raised on occasion (formulations exist that pertain to pedagogical-theoretical contexts, such as the argument that the study of film should occupy a central place in a liberal arts curriculum (Cavell, 1981: 265–74)), as far as I am aware, this question has yet to be formulated in a practical educational context. In terms of film as a teaching resource for students in relation to *Bildung*, practical guides or scientific journal articles are hard to find. Sometimes (popular) films are used to introduce a topic in ethics (for example, Marshall, 2003; Van Es, 2003), to illustrate major ethical theories or key contemporary moral issues (Kowalski, 2012; Shaw, 2012) or to reflect on ethical experiences aroused by film (Sinnerbrink, 2016). In other cases, films are considered as didactic entertainment: they are seen as presenting a moral world in which characters live their lives and, indirectly, regarded as an invitation for viewers to reflect on their own lives (Kupfer, 1999) and broaden their ethical imagination (Grønstad, 2016). A recent article by Manuel Zahn (2011), explicitly exploring some of the connections between film, *Bildung* and education, is a theoretical rather than a practical exploration of the question of the pedagogical implications of film experience, and thus does not concretely indicate how *Bildung* might be realized in education.

I argue therefore that a significant emphasis in film education is placed upon critical and theoretical approaches, rather than upon practical approaches relating to students' personal development. There are some exceptions, however. An interesting example of educational practices conducted in universities related to film and *Bildung*, for example, is explored by Eckert and Martin's (2018) study on *FilmBildung*, which describes a project on collage, life writing and film education with elderly people, as carried out by students. In this article, I propose a similar educational practice also meant for university students: an approach that seeks to apply the method of 'moral case deliberation' to *Bildung* in general, and in particular to the interpretation of the existential dimension of film in academic educational environments.

## A short history of the concept of *Bildung*

The concept of *Bildung* is strongly related to the educational theory of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Von Humboldt was not the first author who used the concept of *Bildung*—in ancient Greece one finds various and competing views on education related to the notion of *Bildung*, such as the oratorical vision (Isocrates) and the philosophical vision (Plato) of education (Kimball, 1995). The word '*Bildung*' was first used (Nordenbo, 2002: 342), however, as part of the educational thinking of the Enlightenment, around

the 1750s. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's emphasis on notions of autonomy and freedom (Kontio, 2012), and his discussion of the purpose (rather than the means) of education (Nordenbo, 2002: 344), were important for the modern tradition of *Bildung*, as was the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who lectured on the subject of education and stressed the importance of reason and its disciplining, cultivating, civilizing and moralizing functions (Kant, 1971; see Sorkin, 1983: 64–5).

In a short fragment entitled 'Theory of *Bildung*', Von Humboldt (2010: 58) writes that it is:

the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person ... This can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay.

In order to develop our humanity, Von Humboldt stresses that man's inner being has to be confronted with external objects of the world – an activity he interprets as 'alienation'. If this process of going out to the world should contribute to an individual's *Bildung*, however, 'it is crucial that he should not lose himself in this alienation, but rather reflect back into his inner being the clarifying light and the comforting warmth of everything that he undertakes outside himself' (ibid.: 59).

This return to oneself is thus an essential feature of the concept of *Bildung*: the world is the place where human fulfilment can be found, but this outward drive has to be reflected back into one's innermost self. In this respect, all academic disciplines may be said to investigate the external world, yet not all result in an experience of *Bildung*. Scientific activities give us knowledge of the world but do not automatically induce *Bildung*. Mere scholarship and scattered knowledge can be transformed into scholarly *Bildung* and unified understanding, but only by a return to the individual's own inner being, and in this way the individual is able to avoid a state of alienation (Von Humboldt, 2010; see Lüth, 1998: 44–7).

Considering the development of educational practices in which *Bildung* is the main focus, it is interesting to consider how, according to Von Humboldt, the individual relates to the external world. For Von Humboldt, social relations play an important role for, as science can provide access to the external world, so can involvement with other human beings enlarge one's perspective. The particularity of other people confronts the individual with new perspectives and opinions, but may also alienate individuals from the self. While for Von Humboldt, relationships with others may lead to enrichment of one's individuality, equally they may lead to antagonism and friction. Nevertheless, the experience of contrast contains the possibility of returning to one's own inner being, facilitating a productive debate, and assisting individuals in becoming more sharply aware of the views, beliefs and convictions of others (Lüth, 1998: 51–3). Dialogue may thus be an important ingredient of an educational practice centred on *Bildung*.

Exploring further the ways in which watching films may contribute to the ideal of *Bildung*, it is illuminating to consider the work of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. According to Gadamer, the aim of personal development can only be achieved if one goes beyond one's own particular experiences (Gadamer, 1975: 10–19). *Bildung*, Gadamer (ibid.: 14) writes, 'goes beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to allow what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which one can grasp the thing.' To immerse oneself in the world of classical antiquity (Gadamer's example), or in a film (my example), thus provides a means of acquiring perspectives that may help develop theoretical and practical insights. While immersion in such a

world carries the risk of alienation, there remains always the possibility to return to oneself, a possibility which – for Gadamer, following Von Humboldt – is crucial to the idea of *Bildung* (ibid.: 15–18).

In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Ricoeur (1981: 112–28) introduces the ‘hermeneutical arc’, a notion he uses to describe the movement back and forth between naive and in-depth interpretations of works of literature. For Ricoeur, a naive interpretation is our first way of approaching a text: while reading we are triggered by events that interest us and characters that fascinate us, intuitively constructing a meaning of the text in which these events and characters are understood. This level of comprehension is designated by Ricoeur as ‘narrative understanding’. In contrast, an in-depth interpretation arises from the application of structural analysis, critical historical approaches and other literary methodologies. Ricoeur refers to this level through the notion of ‘narratological rationality’. These levels correspond to the first two steps of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical arc, and in the last phase these two levels are integrated so that the naive interpretation is enriched and the in-depth interpretation reoriented towards the original sense of questioning and fascination. This last step is identified by Ricoeur as ‘appropriation’ (Ricoeur, 1976: 71–95). In line with Ricoeur, I consider *Bildung* as moving along the three steps of the hermeneutical arc: being confronted with the external world of literature (Ricoeur) or film (my proposal), the self tries to understand the external world in two steps (narrative understanding and narratological rationality). The return to oneself – the third step – is then understood as a process of *appropriating* the meaning of a particular work of literature or a film.

## Experiencing films

An important question, however, remains *how* exactly the ideals of *Bildung* can be realized in educational settings. In the remainder of this article, I will explore how films can contribute to the realization of the ideal of *Bildung*, and how an education centred around the experience of watching and discussing films might be constructed.

Like literature, films can explore the ambiguities of life, presenting existential dimensions of life through hypothetical scenarios in the form of particular, emotionally engaging narratives, thus offering opportunities to reflect on existential aspects of particular ways of life. I argue that watching, understanding, analysing and interpreting films – before relating them and their existential dimensions to one’s own experiences – is one possible way to fulfil the aims of *Bildung*. Films might be seen as better vehicles for educational purposes regarding *Bildung* than works of literature, for they can be watched together in a short time.

The experience of a film can be considered at different levels. Regarding the interpretation of cinematic stories, Ricoeur’s (1985: 4, 158) distinction between ‘narrative understanding’ and ‘narratological rationality’ is useful. Narrative understanding is our first way of approaching a story: while reading a narrative, the reader develops and deepens his or her understanding of the story from what is read and from his or her creative imagination. Typically, it is an intuitive way of thinking in which the reader constructs ‘a world of the text’ (Ricoeur, 1985: 5–6). Narratological rationality is described by Ricoeur as a style of ‘theoretical understanding’, a way of detached thinking, aiming at uncovering and analysing the text’s deep structures (Ricoeur, 1991: 23–4).

These concepts can also be applied to the process of understanding films. The first term (‘narrative understanding’) is related to a way of ‘thinking’ that is present when we try (perhaps unconsciously) to understand the images and sounds of a film

and follow its storyline. Everyone who is watching a film is involved in a process of narrative understanding. While watching a film, we are touched by certain images, words and sounds. We see some characters in a sympathetic light; other characters we do not engage with or they leave us indifferent. During the film, we follow the events and the developments of the characters. We are often thrilled, moved to tears, laughter or disgust. These affections and emotions can have a 'searchlight function': they 'direct us to salient elements of our environment, bringing relevant perceptual phenomena to our attention' (Plantinga, 2009, 1–4, 79 (quotation); see Carroll, 1999: 28). They thus help us to focus on elements of the story that are significant to us. The process of watching a film is characterized by the absence of the explanatory look. It can be seen as a way of being captivated in enchantment – an experience of being swept away by the images, sounds, words, characters and storyline of the film. While being captured by the film, however, we still 'think' and 'understand' – what one might describe as 'narrative understanding'.

Ricoeur's (1985) second term ('narratological rationality') concerns a more distant interpretation in which the film is evaluated and, eventually, consciously related to one's own life. Unlike the level of narrative understanding, the level of narratological rationality is not always or necessarily present. Affect and emotions can function as bridges between these two levels: they belong to our spontaneous responses to films (the level of narrative understanding), but in their searchlight function they may lead to a more detached reflection on deeper structures of film narrative, and upon the way in which these structures influence our own experiences. After watching a film, we may thus try to reflect on it from a more distant perspective, using tools to explain what was going on, such as structural explanation and aspects of film theory. Here, a different type of thinking is needed, Ricoeur's (ibid.) 'narratological rationality', a type of reflection that is close to the way of thinking we apply when we are looking for explanations, and that characterizes many academic practices. One can thus analyse films by examining cinematic techniques such as visual and auditive focalization, ambiguities caused by voice-overs and flashbacks (Verstraten, 2009) and – related to analysis of the storyline – classical narratological techniques as described in studies about storytelling (Bal, 1991).

According to Ricoeur (1991: 25–33), such processes of interpretation are anchored in the ground of lived experience. While intuitively understanding a film, we focus on characters, events and perspectives that are significant to us. While this level of narrative understanding is enriched by narratological analyses, the process of interpretation in its entirety is not completed until the film is 'appropriated' by the viewer (Ricoeur, 1981: 112–28). This allows us to begin explicitly evaluating the film in terms of what we would do if we were in the shoes of the characters.

## Disentangling the existential dimensions of film

While watching a film, we intuitively respond to its existential dimensions, without always being aware of our responses. 'Understanding' and 'responding' are interpreted as emotional and rational processes of reflection. Considering a *Bildung*-focused project of education, consciously reflecting on our experiences as film viewers may be important in terms of our personal development. A first step in fulfilling this aim is to organize a discussion after a film is screened, and at this point it is important to make a distinction between Ricoeur's (1985) two levels of reflection and, in particular, to prevent oneself or one's students from arriving at the level of 'narratological rationality' too soon.

To regain the process of narrative understanding, it is necessary to start with questions such as: What triggered your attention? Which scenes did you experience as touching or moving? Is there something about the film you cannot forget? The aim is to register spontaneous impressions and focus upon emotions aroused during the watching of the film (see Van den Berk and Verbeek, 2013). Being aware of these impressions and emotions makes it possible to reconstruct what we experienced at the level of narrative understanding.

In this phase, one can make an attempt to systematically amplify the film experiences of the viewers involved. Tjeu van den Berk and Marjeet Verbeek (ibid.: 25–60) have developed a method to handle impressions and emotions in such a way that heightens or amplifies the level of subjective understanding. Based on the work of Carl Jung, Van den Berk and Verbeek (ibid.) present their method of ‘amplification’ as a limited association, opposed to free association. Amplification here concerns the construction of a web of associations around the aroused impressions and emotions. These associations must not, however, lead too far away from the images, sounds and scenes of the film, and the limitations upon association arise from a continuous return to the core of one’s film experience – an experience that amplification must help deepen. During this phase, the experience of the film is not just a starting point to reflect on certain existential questions, but the main object of analysis.

This goal can be realized through an insistence that amplification is practised in relation to two contexts. The first is the personal context: Why does a certain scene touch you? Which of *your* memories are evoked by this image? Do special feelings play a role? This personal context must always be connected, however, to the context of the film – to certain images, sounds, scenes, characters and parts of the storyline, in particular the beginning and the end of the film (Van den Berk and Verbeek, 2013: 45–9). In this way, the process of narrative understanding can be recaptured and our film experience can teach us more about ourselves. To pursue this kind of association, however, requires a safe educational environment.

After the phase of amplification, contextual information and further literature about the film can be read and shared. The question ‘What was the film about?’ can now be addressed in a more detailed manner, and the film can also be compared to other films and considered from critical and philosophical perspectives. This phase of understanding the film corresponds with Ricoeur’s (1985) process of narratological rationality. Now the question ‘What would I have done if I were in the situation of a certain character?’ can be raised, and in this way the viewer ‘returns to oneself’ and *appropriates* the meaning of the film.

## **Bildung and effective educational practices**

Disentangling the manner in which film experiences relate to the existential dimensions of life involves making explicit our process of narrative understanding, actively executing practices of narratological rationality, and explicitly relating the film to one’s own life (appropriation). In this way, I argue, film experiences can contribute to the goal of personal development and identity formation – the purpose of the cultivation of one’s character in relation to one’s role in society (*Bildung*).

How, then, might the ideal of *Bildung* be translated into effective educational practices, and thus allow such existential film experiences to be discussed in the academy?

First, a film must be chosen and screened, preferably in a cinema-like setting. In my example, students will be watching *7 Giorni* (Rolando Colla, 2016) in a lecture



hall with appropriate audiovisual facilities. The film is a compelling story about the pleasures, joys and troubles of falling in love. Ivan (Bruno Todeschini) and Chiara (Alessia Barela) are – separately – going to spend a week on the small Sicilian island of Levanzo, in order to assist with preparations for the wedding of Ivan's brother (the groom) and Chiara's best friend (the bride). They arrive at Levanzo seven days before the wedding and soon become attracted to each other. The film presents the relationship between Ivan and Chiara, however, as being characterized by forces that bring them together while also tearing them apart: both Chiara and Ivan initially shrink from beginning an enduring relationship, deciding to enjoy the brief window of time they are sharing together in Levanzo, but this ultimately proves difficult for both of them.

After watching *7 Giorni*, students are divided into working groups of approximately 18 people (a group size that I and my colleagues have found to be particularly effective). The tutor of each working group starts by explaining the aims of the session: to explore and disentangle the process of narrative understanding in film experience. Students then discuss specific questions in pairs in order to apply the method of amplification, such as: 'What triggered your attention?'; 'By which scenes were you touched and moved?'; 'Is there something you can't forget?'. In this way, they apply a process of amplification. In this phase, they support each other in interpreting the film, explicating and becoming more fully conscious of the emotions they experienced, and discovering what touched them deeply. While walking around in the classroom, the tutor may wish to help students further clarify what they found important in their experiences of the film – by, for instance, encouraging them to take into account aspects of their personal context. Rather than engaging with this part of the interpretation process individually, it can be more productive to do so in dialogue with others. Through working together, students learn to express their moral intuitions and to support them with arguments. The pairs of students then complete their dialogue by focusing upon one dilemma related to the film that they think is most important to talk about further and explore in greater depth. These dilemmas may be about particular features of the relationship between the main characters, such as Ivan's jealous behaviour, his ideas about how 'time destroys love' or Chiara's efforts to keep an existing relationship with her partner Stefano secret, but they may also be about more general features of relationships, such as the distinction between physical and emotional aspects of erotic love.

After this discussion, the tutor takes stock of the various dilemmas and the group determines which dilemma they wish to reflect on together at greater length. To do this in an effective way, I have found the method of 'moral case deliberation' – as developed in the context of healthcare practices (Tan *et al.*, 2018) – to be particularly useful. In the practice of healthcare, ethical dilemmas often occur, and in such situations a choice between two mutually excluding options must be made. Such choices, however, are frequently difficult to make and lack a satisfactory resolution, because the excluding options can be identified with different values to which many people would wish to adhere simultaneously. Every choice, therefore, has adverse or harmful consequences. The aim of moral case deliberation 'is to have an open and equal exchange of ideas in order to find answers to the moral question within the case, to improve decision-making processes and to develop moral competencies further among healthcare professionals' (Tan *et al.*, 2018: 1). The method of moral case deliberation consists of ten steps: (1) introduction of the aim and procedure; (2) presentation of the actual case; (3) formulating the moral question and the dilemma; (4) clarification in order to place oneself in the situation of the case presenter; (5) case analysis in terms of perspectives, underlying values and norms; (6) looking for alternative (medical) interventions;

(7) making an individual choice regarding the dilemma; (8) dialogical inquiry into the differences and similarities in personal perspectives; (9) drawing conclusions about the case; and (10) evaluation of the method of moral case deliberation (Tan *et al.*, 2018: 2–4).

Due to the substantive similarity between ethical dilemmas and the existential dimensions of life (both can be seen to be related to the ambiguities of human endeavour and experience), the method of moral case deliberation can usefully be applied to the context of a pedagogy focused on *Bildung*. The first steps of this method are readily familiar: the class starts with a presentation of the explanation of the aims through the process of watching a film: by screening *7 Giorni*, an actual case is presented. Then, the existential questions of the film are explored. Finally, clarification is achieved by relating one's own experiences to the events and characters of the film. In these phases of educational practice, the process of 'narrative understanding' serves as the focus of attention. Since in class we do not need to go into decision-making processes, we can confine the second stage of the application of the method of moral case deliberation to the following steps: formulating the dilemma; case analysis in terms of perspectives, underlying values and norms; looking for alternative actions; making an individual choice regarding the dilemma; and a dialogical inquiry. Here, 'narratological rationality' and 'appropriation' will take centre stage.

The most pivotal event in *7 Giorni* is arguably the moment at which Chiara and Ivan decide to enter into a relationship. Ivan believes it would be better to end the relationship before things become monotonous, boring and uninspiring: 'it is time that kills love', he says. While Chiara wonders how feasible this will be, she agrees with Ivan's proposal to put an end to their relationship after three days. In one of my classes, students were keen to reflect on this decision. Is it really possible to adhere to such an agreement? If two people fall in love, seemingly beyond the bounds of a short-term erotic relationship, is it then possible to rationally decide to stop the relationship after three days? Through addressing these questions, interpretations of the film can be deepened by consulting critical reviews and philosophical perspectives related to the themes of the film ('narratological rationality'). Regarding the difference between love and sexual desire, one might, for instance, refer to Roger Scruton's (1986) work on the distinction between an embodied subject and what he calls 'obscenities'. For Scruton (*ibid.*: 241), love is an interpersonal relationship and has 'a tendency to grow with time', while obscenities are related to 'depersonalised conceptions of human sexuality' (*ibid.*: 138). To balance Scruton's view, it might be interesting to read parts of Bataille's (1962: 12–24) thoughts on eroticism.

Discussions about this crucial event of the film may lead to a variety of dilemmas, such as the choice between love and desire, trust and joy, and between being faithful and being selfish. In my class, students decided to talk about the latter dilemma. They tried to relate the dilemma to the perspectives of Ivan and Chiara, to look for alternative scenarios, and to express underlying values and norms related to these perspectives. By relating the dilemma to their own life ('appropriation'), they came up with individual choices that were subjected to dialogical inquiry.

Dialogue can be seen to be the most important ingredient in the whole process of understanding. From the moment at which students began exploring the meaning of their film experiences in pairs, dialogue played a central role. In these conversations, students exchanged experiences and tried to understand the film from each other's perspectives. If the students were open to what their partner had to say, and were honestly prepared to accept this other perspective as potentially relevant and valid



for themselves (Widdershoven *et al.*, 2009: 238), then this dialogue may have assisted them in gaining a fuller, deeper understanding of the existential dimensions of *7 Giorni*.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have put forward some suggestions concerning the way in which the ideal of *Bildung* may be pursued through the use of film in higher education institutions. I have described *Bildung* as the development of one's perspectives and capacities for the purpose of contributing constructively to the well-being of society. Film would seem to be a highly useful medium through which to attempt to realize this ideal. My proposal for an educational approach in which the ideal of *Bildung* is central follows the theorizations of Von Humboldt, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Films function as worlds that assist viewers in reaching beyond particular experiences. Films immerse the viewer in a world that is different from his or her own, and help audiences to discover new perspectives. In discussing various themes that are related to the film, film viewers can 'return to themselves' by relating new insights to their own lives. Subsequently, from dialogical learning processes following the screening of a film, students can explore a variety of viewpoints related to topics that emerge from the film, and thus reflect upon the meaning of these perspectives for their own lives.

## Acknowledgements

This article was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton World Charity Foundation. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton World Charity Foundation. The author wants to thank Professor René van Woudenberg and Dr Peter Versteeg, as well as the editors of *Film Education Journal* and the anonymous peer reviewers, for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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## Filmography

*7 Giorni* (7 Days, IT/SW 2016, Rolando Colla)

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