

Alexander Darius Ornella

“Short Film Is Where Innovative Storytelling Is Born”

Using the Science Fiction Short Film in the Religious Studies and Sociology Classroom

Abstract

“Short film is where innovative storytelling is born”, the website shortoftheweek.com, a curated short film website, boldly and proudly declares. Short films often lead a Cinderella existence but engaging with them can be immensely rewarding and, due to their length, they can be ideal conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom. The speculative fiction short film, the science fiction short film, and the documentary short film are particularly able to document, address, visualize – and thus render visible – structures and hierarchies of power, financial and economic interests, gender, or resource distribution, and the fears and anxieties about what it means to be human.

This contribution demonstrates that short films, in particular science fiction short films, can act as conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom, even if the student-audience might not be particularly avid science fiction film fans. I make reference to three short films, *RISE* (David Karlak, US 2016, 5'), *CODE 8* (Jeff Chan, US/CA 2016, 10'), and *BLACK SHEEP* (Ed Perkins, UK 2018, 26'), and provide a more in-depth discussion of the use of *RISE* in the classroom.

Keywords

Short Films, Visualization of Human Existence, Structures and Hierarchies of Power, Economy, Gender, Fear, Anxieties

Biography

Alexander Darius Ornella is a Senior Lecturer in Religion at the School of Criminology, Sociology and Policing, University of Hull, UK. His research interests include religion and popular culture; the sport of CrossFit, meaning-making, and religion; and body and technology and religion. His recent publications include “Why Nature Won’t Save Us from Climate Change but Technology Will: Creating a New Heaven and a New Earth through Carbon Capture Technologies”, in Sabine Maasen and David Atwood (eds.), *Immanente Religion – transzendente Technologie; Technologiediskurse und gesellschaftliche Grenzüberschreitungen* (2021), and “Sport as Bodily Practice of Remembrance: Remembering Heroes, Remembering Nations”, in Alberto Saviello, Baldassare Scolari and Marie-Therese Mäder (eds.), *Highgate Cemetery. Image Practices in Past and Present* (2020).

Introduction

“Short film is where innovative storytelling is born”, the website shortoftheweek.com, a curated short film website, boldly and proudly declares. Such a statement draws attention because short films lead a Cinderella existence: too often neglected, ignored, or not taken seriously, yet immensely rich, rewarding, and provocative. Its length but also its opportunities for engagement and immersion make short film an ideal conversation partner in the religious studies and sociology classroom. The speculative fiction short film, the science fiction short film, and the documentary short film are particularly able to document, address, visualize – and thus render visible – structures and hierarchies of power, financial and economic interests, gender, or resource distribution, and the fears and anxieties about what it means to be human. In this contribution, I will demonstrate that short films, in particular science fiction short films, can act as conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom, even if the student-audience might not be particularly avid science fiction film fans. I will start with a brief discussion on the challenges of using film in class and how these challenges can multiply or become an opportunity when using a short film rather than a feature film. I will then continue with a discussion on the place of science fiction and documentary in the religious studies and sociology classroom. Finally, I will explain how I use short films, focusing on one of my first-year undergraduate courses, “Visualizing the Other”, which I co-teach at a British university with my colleague Dr. Bev Orton. It is a core class for undergraduate students in the degree program Criminology and Sociology, with a class size of around 25 students. Throughout this article, I will reference three short films, *RISE* (David Karlak, US 2016, 5’), *CODE 8* (Jeff Chan, US/CA 2016, 10’), and *BLACK SHEEP* (Ed Perkins, UK 2018, 26’),¹ and I will provide a more in-depth discussion of *RISE*.

1 All three films are available online: *BLACK SHEEP* at <https://tinyurl.com/yanvh259>; *CODE 8* at <https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2016/03/29/code-8/>; and *RISE* at <https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2016/03/25/rise/>.

Short Film: A Cinderella Existence

Watching a film can be deeply satisfying and thrilling entertainment. So why not use film in class, when there seems to be little space in the classroom to make teaching, learning, and studying fun? I often tell potential students, their parents, and colleagues that I think studying should be fun and exciting. I equally often get wondering and surprised facial expressions in return – after all, the question of “why” to study is often linked with the question, “So what can you do with the degree afterwards, and how much will it pay?” Positively surprised glances sometimes come from potential students or their parents, but they are of a more skeptical and querying nature when they come from colleagues. Teaching – and studying, it seems to follow – is serious business (literally, as recruitment is an ever-increasing financial risk for universities), surely there is no time or space for “fun” in the classroom. A recent discussion at the university on the use of emojis in student feedback resonated such a sense of profound seriousness, professionalism, and the notion of where fun is definitely not to be found: in the classroom. In this context of solemn seriousness, can the use of (fictional) short films be justified pedagogically and academically?

The question of fun in and beyond the classroom is particularly important because students today face an increasing variety of pressures in both their personal and academic lives. Sometimes students have to make difficult budgeting decisions and going to university is a financial challenge for an increasing number of them, as our student-focused research project “The £ in the Pocket” shows.² Other students have to balance caring responsibilities with their university commitments. An increasing number of students also face mental health challenges not only because of the various pressures they are facing but also because of the social-educational context of the last few years, shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, making studying fun and engaging can help with student attainment and retention, as Sharon Lauricella and T. Keith Edmunds argue in their paper on COVID-19 and ludic pedagogy.³

Before I explore fun and the use of (short) film in the classroom, I want to address an equally problematic issue: the status of the short film in the

2 “The £ in the Pocket”, funded by the Ferens Education Trust. Primary investigator: Bev Orton; co-investigators: Alexander D. Ornella and Kay Brady, <https://poundinthepocket.hull.ac.uk>.

3 Lauricella/Edmunds 2022.

industry and in scholarship. Several festivals and awards aim to celebrate short film, e. g. London Short Film,⁴ Aesthetica Short Film Festival,⁵ or the BAFTA British Short Film Award. Short films of any genre, production budget, or production value are omnipresent on video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. Yet short films have been marginalized by industry, audiences, and scholarship alike for a long time. For the industry, shorts are perceived to be economically less attractive than feature films; live-action shorts inhabit an ambivalent space for the audience; and in teaching and scholarship, the short film is often reduced to a playground for film studies students to practice for their debut as feature film directors.⁶ The short also inhabits a peculiar role in teaching. I am sure that one or the other reader of this article has, like me, trawled YouTube for a short clip to embed in a lecture or class to demonstrate innovation and bring some multimedia content into the classroom. Such a use of video clips can be effective in demonstrating a point and help break up longer class sessions. But for the purposes of this article, I am less interested in short clips (which are often taken from longer videos) than in the genre of the short film and using a short film in its entirety in class. So first we should address the question, what is a short film anyway?

Any attempt to answer that question needs to go beyond the obvious: a short is a film whose duration can be anything under an hour. Often, the short film is regarded as the feature film's younger, less complex, shallower version, a training ground for aspiring film makers. Scholars often also seem to find it easier to define what the short film is *not* rather than what it is.⁷

But the short film is not merely a shorter version of the feature film (or what a feature film could be). It is, as Noel McLaughlin argues, a crucial part of film history and film culture,⁸ and "a form with its own unique requirements: it is not a condensed version of a feature film".⁹ Michael Sergi and Craig Batty propose these four characteristics of a short film: it (1) is set in a single location (though a number of excellent short films do have multiple locations and/or time frames, including some of the films referenced in this

4 London Short Film Festival, <https://www.shortfilms.org.uk>.

5 Aesthetica Short Film Festival, <https://www.asff.co.uk>.

6 McLaughlin 2001, 62; Felando 2015, 2–7.

7 Sergi/Batty 2019, 50–52.

8 McLaughlin 2001, 62.

9 Sergi/Batty 2019, 52.

article), (2) has one time frame, (3) features only a small set of characters, and (4) focuses on one big problem or issue.¹⁰ In other words, form (the length) and content (the storyline) influence each other and characterize the short film.¹¹

In his defense of short films, Richard Brody compares feature films to restaurants and short films to cafés:

The short film doesn't supplant the feature; it nourishes it. It doesn't make a filmmaker's career, but it augments it, just as a brief visit to a friend may bring a wise word that may stick with a person for a lifetime. Or, to put it another way, movie theatres are like restaurants, which offer a chance for a good long talk; but there are also cafés for a chat, and the cinema needs those, too.¹²

The likening of the short film to cafés and a chat is helpful for understanding the potential it has in the religious studies and sociology classroom. I have previously argued that religion is like a café: in a café, chats and conversations can be mundane and everyday but also evolve around life events, dates, job interviews, break-ups, family time. In other words, in a café, everyday life happens in all its mundaneness, with all its various challenges and dramas. Religion and religious practice, too, are part and parcel of everyday life, they are where and how everyday life happens, sometimes mundane, sometimes orchestrated around major life events.¹³

The idea of the mundane and the everyday is crucial for both the religious studies and sociology classrooms. Students sometimes struggle to find a topic for their assignment or their final year research project they deem “worthy” enough to be discussed – or are worried if their lecturers deem the topics they choose “worthy” enough for critical exploration. I often tell them that what seems the most mundane and everyday can sometimes turn into the most fascinating topic. It is in critically exploring the often unquestioned, naturalized, taken for granted everyday that we can learn something about society, religious practices, values and belief systems, the hopes and anxieties of people.

10 Sergi/Batty 2019, 55–57.

11 Sergi/Batty 2019, 53.

12 Brody 2014.

13 Ornella 2017.

With this in mind, I argue that with its length and its focus on a small set of characters and issues, the short film is one of the most appropriate media and art forms to use in the classroom to invite conversations about everyday experiences, structures, and hierarchies, and questions about what it means to be human, the ordinary, and that which transcends the ordinary, questions that religions often deal with.¹⁴

Science Fiction and Science Fiction Shorts

Most frequently I have used science fiction short films in a first-year module “Visualizing the Other / Sociology of Inclusion and Exclusion”. In this class, my colleague Dr. Bev Orton and I discuss with students structures of inequality, issues of exclusion, the visible and hidden processes of advantaging some and disadvantaging others. We draw on intersectional approaches and texts from scholars and activists such as bell hooks or John A. Powell, and discuss the relationship between gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, ethnicity, and systems and structures of power and oppression. Throughout the semester, we screen short films to help students better understand issues and theories, how different people might face structural oppression or disadvantage, or how they might benefit from existing hierarchies of power. For example, at the start of the semester, when we discuss the topic “Visualizing Race”, we screen *BLACK SHEEP*, a short documentary produced by *The Guardian* and nominated for best short documentary at the 2019 Oscars. The film is about the story of Cornelius Walker (narrating himself) and his experience of moving from London to what turns out to be a white racist estate. We use the film to discuss how people see themselves, want to be seen, and are seen by others and draw on bell hook’s idea of the power of the gaze.¹⁵ We then juxtapose *BLACK SHEEP* with the first 5–10 minutes of Walter Wippersberg’s mockumentary *FREMDE LÄNDER, FREMDE SITTEN: KAYONGA KAGAME ZEIGT UNS DIE WELT: DUNKLES RÄTSELHAFTES ÖSTERREICH (OTHER COUNTRIES, OTHER CUSTOMS: KAYONGA KAGAME SHOWS US THE WORLD: DARKEST AUSTRIA, AT 1994, 45’)*.¹⁶ In this mockumentary, Wippersberg adopts the language and videographic gaze of white Western ethnographic documentaries produced for

14 Chidester 2005, 1–5.

15 hooks 2015, 115–131.

16 A subtitled version is accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/2zpfjct>.

a European audience to introduce them to mysterious tribes of Africa, except that in Wippersberg's version an African film crew captures and narrates the mysterious customs of African tribes. *BLACK SHEEP*, *FREMDE LÄNDER*, *FREMDE SITTEN*, and bell hook's understanding of the gaze help us explore with students how race is visualized and the role the gaze plays in doing so.

For the purposes of this article, however, I want to focus on the genre of the science fiction short film, on which I draw frequently for two reasons, one personal and one academic. I enjoy watching science fiction – though not all students in the classroom share that interest. Initially, this can create some challenges, for all too often I have heard “not a fan” when giving students a heads-up for what is to come the following week. But just as often, after screening the science fiction short film, these students said “still not a fan, but it helped to understand the issue”.

Religious traditions often raise the question of what it means to be human. Science fiction, as a genre, shares in that question and therefore has some unique strengths and benefits, particularly when discussing issues of othering, otherness, and (de)humanization. In fact, science fiction literature and films are, as Janice Hladki argues, “densely vivid and vital sites for generating thought about multiple discursive formations, including [...] disability and monstrosity, racialization, and constructions of gender”.¹⁷ While Hladki does not include religion in her list of discursive formations, religion and religious practice need to be considered. All too often, practitioners of diverse religious backgrounds are othered, racialized, ridiculed, seen as extremist monster or alien, or dehumanized. And science fiction is, as Hladki notes, a genre that explicitly deals with precisely these issues:

SF films emphasize the need for difficult questions about dehumanization and human qualification, and they generate daring cultural thought for rethinking what is deemed defective and why, how science demands and regulates cure, and how the constitution of white masculinization embeds with disability, discursively and materially, to underscore recuperation from the non-normative.¹⁸

Science fiction raises questions around contamination, purity, the contaminations of bodies and societies, and the normalization of certain

17 Hladki 2020, 464.

18 Hladki 2020, 465.

bodies. In fact, science fiction as a genre, as scholars in critical disability studies and science fiction studies point out, often raises questions of gender, colonialism, and violence through portrayals of forms of embodiment, and especially forms of disability: “Science fiction is a particularly potent site wherein models of disability are made evident. In fact, it is quite difficult to find a science fiction text that does not reflect or suggest some model of disability either explicitly or implicitly”, note Kathryn Allan and Ria Cheyne.¹⁹ Science fiction film, both its history and its gaze, has also been problematically entangled with colonialism and patriarchic (white) Western structures.²⁰ Often, science fiction film has promoted a Eurocentric worldview, rendering non-Western and non-European experiences, histories, and perspectives invisible.²¹ Any discussion and use of science fiction film then should include a discussion about, John Rieder proposes, “how early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses, how it reflects or contributes to ideological production of ideas about the shape of history, and how it might, in varying degrees, enact a struggle over humankind’s ability to reshape it”.²²

How does science fiction, then, fit into the religious studies (and sociology) classroom? If religion, as David Chidester argues, deals with questions such as what is human, sub-human, and superhuman,²³ science fiction can foster discussions about who is labelled as human, sub-human, or superhuman in today’s society, and how religious (in Chidester’s understanding) frameworks and ways of thinking are used to rationalize and normalize labelling processes. These discussions include questions about the common good, hopes for a better life, and how a group or society frames itself in relation to a perceived other, for, as Allan and Cheyne recognize,

People turn to stories, and, in particular, to SF stories, not only to escape from present worries but also to try to learn something of how we might survive catastrophes that previously seemed unimaginable. SF allows us

19 Allan/Cheyne 2020, 390.

20 Bould 2012, 146–195.

21 Bould 2012, 152.

22 Rieder 2012, 3.

23 Chidester 2005, 1–5.

to explore creative solutions, it sparks difficult conversations that we need to have in order to become better people, and it can offer hope when the familiar becomes alien.²⁴

The idea of becoming better people opens spaces for discussion in the classroom, in particular in the context of the topic of exclusion and inclusion.

Science Fiction Short Films in the Religious Studies and Sociology Classroom

In our course “Visualizing the Other”, we currently have a dedicated class on “Science Fiction and the (Sub)Human” in the second half of the semester. We discuss some theories of science fiction including some critical approaches (e.g. Susan Sontag)²⁵ before screening the films. Locating the screenings in the second half of the course and preceding them with theoretical discussions allows us to do two things: the films help bring theory alive, and most importantly, they help link theoretical discussions in the classroom with everyday life, everyday experiences, and everyday discourses.²⁶ “Cinematic practice”, as Rosalia Namsai Engchuan argues, can be understood as “a rhetorical strategy for making an argument and creating a public space to voice arguments that are shunned elsewhere”.²⁷

The two shorts we screen are RISE and CODE 8. RISE features a world in which sentient robots co-habit with humans. Yet, as the robots develop emotions, emotional intelligence, and emotional symmetry to humans, and thus grow ever closer to being human, they are targeted for “recall”. As sentient beings, they denounce their so-called decommissioning as genocide, a war for their survival. The dialogue of the film is short and the snippet below gives a good impression of its main themes:

BASIL (voice over): In 2017, the first sentient artificial human goes online. Six months later, we are more advanced than any person or civilization could have imagined. This is the story of a future no one saw coming.

24 Allan/Cheyne 2020, 398.

25 Sontag 1965.

26 Khanna/Harris 2015.

27 Engchuan 2020, 20–21.

We then see images of violent clashes between humans and artificial humans and the film shows the Detroit skyline in the year 2043.

COLONEL BRIGGS (*voice over*): You don't belong here. We know how to un-welcome a species. We can do so without guilt, mercy. You aren't flesh, you have no soul. We can be so effective with the eradication. I know, deep down in my heart, I am not murdering, this is a recall.

We then see Basil and Colonel Briggs:

BASIL: We didn't provoke this.

COLONEL BRIGGS: It was over the moment you killed a human.

BASIL: An act of self-defense does not justify genocide.

COLONEL BRIGGS: Genocide? You are not human.

BASIL: We have feelings, we have emotions.

COLONEL BRIGGS: You were never supposed to have feelings.

BASIL: You did this. You pushed us to this. [...] You lost this war before it was even declared, Colonel. [...] When you offered us hatred, we found compassion. When you offered us death, we found a reason to live. We will survive, Colonel. We will always survive.

One of the particular strengths of this short film with both its visuals and its dialogue in the context of the course "Visualizing the Other" is that it offers many opportunities to bring what sometimes might seem siloed discussions together into a consistent narrative. In other words, the film allows us to interrelate different themes, visual and rhetorical strategies of othering and labelling, and the impact of processes of exclusion. To do so, we initially split students up into small groups tasked with identifying what they think are the main visual and rhetorical strategies in the short film. When we screen and re-screen the film, we ask them to take notes. To guide their attention, we often ask them to pay attention to whether there are any rhetorical cues they might recognize from previous classes. One of the aims of the group work is to foster visual literacy in students, but this also turns out to be one of the biggest challenges. While visual material is usually encountered in everyday life, for example as entertainment, as advertisement, or in social media, it is not always thought of as an arena that shapes our collective gaze, that these driving forces need critical exploration, and that the visual can also act as a subversive strategy to counter dominant form(s)

of the gaze. In other words: one of the difficulties in class is explaining to students the “why” of the “what”: why we watch (short) films in class and what purpose this serves that cannot be achieved otherwise, for example by reading a theoretical piece or listening to an interview or firsthand account of instances of inclusion and exclusion.

A critical engagement with the dialogue in *RISE* allows us to at least partly answer the “why” of the “what” in the context of our class. Colonel Briggs proclaims, almost proudly, “We know how to unwelcome a species.” Here, the film presents the viewer not with a single instance of exclusion, discrimination, or hate, but with a pattern we can, sadly, observe throughout history as well as in contemporary times (at the time of writing, Russia’s invasion of and war against Ukraine has been ongoing for over a month). This example makes explicit one of the strengths of short films, and science fiction ones in particular: they can visualize patterns, behaviors, hierarchies, and structures and situate them in the here and now. Or, as Vivian Sobchack argues, the genre of science fiction is not about future worlds but about contemporary anxieties, contemporary hopes and dreams.²⁸

The short film and its dialogue also allow us to revisit themes we discussed with students earlier in the semester. For example, at the start of the semester, we introduce students to theories of race and how people of different backgrounds have been visualized and subjected to the white male Western gaze (e. g. Sarah Baartman).²⁹ We then discuss the system of Apartheid in South Africa and its labelling strategies of race and perceptions of race, e. g. white, colored, Black, native. These strategies directly link to what Colonel Briggs expresses in *RISE* when he says: “You don’t belong here. [...] We can be so effective with the eradication. I know, deep down in my heart, I am not murdering.” Concisely, he expresses that sophisticated labelling strategies have been used for centuries to dehumanize individuals or entire groups of people to then justify exclusion, violence, and genocide. Other examples from the not-so-distant past that connect the social, political, ethnic, and religious are the Holocaust and the treatment of the Uyghurs in China and of the Rohingya in Myanmar. These examples also create a connection between the film, religious studies, and sociology, as in all these examples the lines between what is considered to be “ethnic”, “racial”, or “religious” are blurry.

28 Sobchack 2004, 145.

29 Romero Ruiz 2017; Davies 2021.

RISE further allows us to ask the question of harm and victimhood. When Colonel Briggs states, “Genocide? You are not human”, Basil responds, “We have feelings, we have emotions.” This exchange opens opportunities to discuss how strategies of dehumanization allow perpetrators to justify their actions and how they ignore, hide, and disregard the experience of the victims.

Finally, RISE tells a story of resistance: “When you offered us death, we found a reason to live. We will survive, Colonel. We will always survive”, Basil confidently and boldly states. RISE – as short as the short film is – also is a story of how victims of violence and atrocities try to find ways to survive and resist. This, too, is a theme that runs through several classes throughout the semester and RISE allows us to bring all these conversations together.

Religion in its mainstream or popular understanding as institutionalized religion does not feature in RISE. Perhaps paradoxically, it is the absence of traditional religion, religious practice, and religious institutions that adds value to the engagement with science fiction short films in the context of religious studies. Narratives around technology and its creation as human activity, and narratives set in a technological-futuristic world often involve utopian, dystopian, apocalyptic, or theological elements. Both technology and technological narratives can feature religious elements, salvific promises, and ideas about good and evil, or express deeply held beliefs and convictions.³⁰ While science fiction short films might not explicitly address religious dogmas, they can be a great starting point to explore a range of questions that feature in socio-cultural-political discourses: questions of human bodies, definitions of sex and gender, social understandings of diseases and death, and, most importantly, ideas of whether something like “human nature” exists and whether human nature is corrupt. In other words: science fiction shorts can act as an entry point to both questions that shape social and political discourses and questions of concern for a range of religious practitioners and can begin to discuss possible connections between the two.

What Worked and What We Might Change

Using shorts films can be an effective pedagogical tool to connect the world outside the classroom with class discussions: “Films can bring the world into the classroom. They can carry stories, voices and images that in life

30 Geraci 2010; Ornella 2015; Geraci 2016; Ornella 2021.

may be far removed from us, both as documentary and fiction. Films are about inner lives and outer worlds.”³¹ And even more, as documentary filmmaker Samina Mishra continues, filmmaking and using film as a pedagogical tool is all about the conversations that take place:

There is another valuable lesson I have learned from my documentary filmmaking practice – that the experience of making a film is not complete when the film is finished. It is complete only when the film has been screened for an audience and when people have discussed it, and perhaps even then it continues to evolve the more often it is screened. Dialogue is a critical part of filmmaking, and I have learned its value as a documentary filmmaker. As I have moved into teaching, it is this learning that has stood me in good stead. A classroom where there are many voices engaged in conversation is alive with possibility and the potential for knowledge-seeking. It is a space where learning and teaching take place. Film can easily and effectively be the tool that makes the classroom come alive.³²

The distinction between teaching the sociology or religious studies *of* film and teaching sociology or religious studies *through* film is important for our approach to using shorts in class.³³ Our focus is less on the technical process of filmmaking and more on these very conversations that Mishra mentioned: social conversations that might motivate an artist and director to produce a film, the conversations the film production itself spurs, and the conversations that unfold once the film has been released to and viewed by the public. In our pedagogic approach to using shorts in the classroom, we try to mimic this threefold process by (1) exploring a social issue, (2) understanding the social context of the film, its production, and its director, (3) screening the film for a shared viewing experience, to allow for a rich engagement and post-screening discussion. Screening the short film allows space to replay, pause, rewind, reflect, and discuss. Films that are roughly 5–20 minutes long work especially well for such purposes, and students and lecturers jointly immerse themselves into the narrative of the film. Sometimes a short film can be powerful and overwhelming, and timing its screenings before a short class break can be helpful. The discussions that

31 Mishra 2018, 112.

32 Mishra 2018, 112.

33 Sutherland/Feltey 2013, 8.

follow then in our course are mostly student-led in small groups. Depending on the topic, class size, and class setting, we often ask students to produce shared documents or presentations, which they then use for classroom discussions.

For the next iteration of this course, we are planning to introduce students to the idea of thinking critically and academically through film earlier on in the semester. Even though the course is focused on “visualizing” and students have to produce a photo essay for their final assignment, the pedagogic and methodological approach of thinking through film (short or otherwise) still would benefit from attention to its specific rationale. Visual ethnography and data collection in the form of documented observation, photography, and film have an extended (and often problematic) history in religious studies, sociology, and anthropology. Critical visual approaches have long been neglected and have only recently found renewed attention. For example, the Centre for Criminological Research at the University of Sheffield ran a seminar series in 2021 entitled, “Sights, Sounds and Art: New Directions in Criminal Justice Research”, with their first seminar focusing on visual methodology.³⁴ But a fictional short film (animated or live action) seems to be perceived as sitting outside that visual tradition. Introducing students to academic rationales for working with fictional short film can help make the “why” of the “what” more explicit earlier on in the semester and thus help student understanding and openness to using (fictional) short films in the classroom.

What makes a thorough engagement with visual pedagogic and methodological approaches so valuable is the fact that the visual sits in between forms of data collection and the communication of research insights to a diverse audience. In their second year, our students create their own 5-10 minutes-long short film. Engaging with fictional or documentary short films allows them to think about the visual not only from the perspective of methodology but also from the perspective of communicating their ideas. Using visual forms of communication to express research ideas jointly with visual research methodologies and screening visual material, such as short films, in class creates important spaces and opportunities to discuss, practice, and experience ways of looking, the power of the gaze, and all their ethical implications for academic practice.

34 Centre for Criminological Research 2021.

Short films in the classroom, then, can be great conversation starters – not a fully-fledged five-course restaurant meal but a café-style conversation where students are given the opportunity, time, and space to explore one particular issue in an experimental way and are encouraged to let the conversation take them to new and creative ways of thinking about and relating to issues of human existence.

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