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# Flipping (and Giving) the Script

## Using Short Films in Religion Exams

### Abstract

For many years now I have put a question on the final exam in various religion courses that asks students to apply ideas from the course to a short film screened during the exam. This is a film we have not watched or discussed before, so it is essentially new data for the class. In this article I discuss some of the challenges I encountered when I began using short films in exams and how I resolved them. I also discuss the many advantages of this approach, some of which I had anticipated (or at least hoped for), while others surprised me. These surprises include congruencies between using short films in exams and principles of trauma-informed pedagogy. The article includes specific examples from three courses of exam questions and films, and answers that three students provided.

### Keywords

Exam, Anxiety, Pedagogy, Trauma, Joy, Animation

### Biography

Ken Derry is Associate Professor of Religion (Teaching Stream) at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada. His teaching and research focus is on the ways in which modern cultural products relate to more “traditional” religious beliefs and practices. He is particularly interested in connections between religion and violence in Indigenous literature and film and in popular culture. With John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on Star Wars by scholars of religion. Ken has also published several essays on pedagogy and the study of religion. He is married, has three cats, and continues to be surprised by how emotional some episodes of THE GREAT BRITISH BAKE OFF can be.

## Trial and Error

I had been teaching a course on religion and film on and off for a decade before something seemingly obvious occurred to me: why not show a film during the final exam? The entire course, as I had conceived it, was about using theories

from the academic study of religion to think about mostly popular, ostensibly non-religious films. For instance, I used Freud's theory of totems and taboos with *PSYCHO* (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1960), and currently I talk about Mary Douglas's views on order, chaos, and boundaries in relation to *PITCH PERFECT* (Jason Moore, US 2012).<sup>1</sup> So, it made complete sense to show students a film during the exam that we had not discussed in class and ask them to think about it using tools they had been learning about during the term.

Why had this apparently self-evident idea not occurred to me before? I suspect in part it is because most of us are so deeply conditioned to think about teaching and learning in very specific, heavily circumscribed ways. While in graduate school, I worked as an exam invigilator, and I never once saw anyone use audio-visual equipment. I'm sure it happens sometimes, but I helped run literally hundreds of exams over six years and I never encountered any approach other than asking students to write on question papers, exam booklets, and multiple-choice forms. We laid out these materials and then students filed into the exam hall and started writing. Scribble scribble, scratch scratch. Pencils down. Time's up.

The first time I used a film for an exam was something of a revelation. I had expected some resistance from the exams office, which was in charge of logistics like scheduling and room bookings. But they were completely on board, which was wonderful. Also wonderful was that because I was showing a film, no other exams would be written in the same hall as the one for my course. This made total sense, but it took me by (very pleasant) surprise. I teach at the University of Toronto, a large public institution with over 70,000 undergraduate students. There can be more than a dozen different exams in a hall of up to 600 people. Just getting into the hall and finding the right seat can be chaotic. The inclusion of a film in my exam meant we were placed in a regular classroom assigned only to our course. This shift immediately made the whole experience more relaxed.

Early on I had to correct a few of my mistakes and oversights. Some of these involved accessibility issues. For instance, some students struggled to hear and remember the dialogue from the video. So, I learned to provide a copy of the script with the exam questions and to activate captions during the screening. The first video I ever used was actually not a short film but

1 It's worth noting at the outset, I think, that none of the courses I teach on movies involve cinema studies approaches in any way. I do not discuss auteur theory, for instance, or *mise-en-scène*, framing, etc. The point of asking students to examine a short film in an exam is to test their understanding of key ideas in the course related to *religion*.

rather a scene near the end of *HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE* (Chris Columbus, GB/US 2001), when Harry confronts Professor Quirrell. It worked well enough for the exam in terms of the scene's content – students could think about it using Christ-figure ideas they had learned, for instance – but it is also quite literally dark, until Quirrell magics up some fire. For some, it was not that easy to see what was happening the whole time. This taught me to choose brighter films – usually animations.

I also learned to use short films instead of scenes from full features. Among other things, this shift meant that I did not have to provide context for the scene and that there were not students in the room arguably advantaged because they had seen the entire production from which the scene was taken and therefore had access (in their memories) to materials that others did not. With short films, everyone is in the same movie boat. And short films provide a complete narrative for students to work with, which in many cases is crucial for analysis. As discussed below, for example, Katherine Fowkes' theory of gender and ghost comedies<sup>2</sup> can only meaningfully be applied to the short film *BAO* (Domee Shi, US 2018, 8') when we know the full story of the characters.

The first short film I picked, which I used for many years, was Pixar's *FOR THE BIRDS* (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000, 3'). I was amazed at what students were able to do with a three-minute, wordless story about a group of small mean birds trying to bully a large friendly bird on a powerline. Many of them analysed the ritual actions of the small birds using ideas from Mary Douglas or Émile Durkheim or Arnold van Gennep. Others noted that the big bird is a Christ-figure sacrificed by the small birds, who are frustrated by the powerline bending low under the massive heft of the unwelcome intruder. They peck violently at its feet until it falls to the ground. The big bird then becomes a kind of saviour, as the small ones are immediately flung into the air when the line recoils with the sudden and dramatic weight reduction, lose their feathers, and hide their nakedness behind the large bird. Some students also mentioned in passing that this scene of misbehaviour and nude shame evokes another biblical story, noting that the Eden reference is underscored when the large bird offers a leaf for strategic coverage (fig. 1).

A final key lesson I learned is that the idea of encountering something entirely new in an exam makes some students nervous. And to be fair, the first time I tried this, I was nervous *for* them. But on the whole they did well.

2 Fowkes 1998.



Fig. 1: Bird karma, or the wages of avian sin: the one with the covering leaf is fifth from the left. Film still, *FOR THE BIRDS* (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000), 00:02:51.

Grades for the short-film question were generally similar to, or better than, results for the more traditional parts of the exam. One way I try to make the students feel more comfortable beforehand is to give them a practice question to help them prepare and to show them that they can do this. So, during our exam review meeting we watch a short video and I ask students to use a couple of theories to interpret it. I also have them discuss possible interpretations with others nearby for a few minutes before I ask for suggestions. And those suggestions are invariably excellent. The experience demonstrates to students not only what they are capable of, but also that others in the class can be helpful resources for learning the course material and preparing for the exam. Afterwards I post a written paragraph sample for the class based on one of their analyses from the review session. This is to help students who could not be in class that day and also to let everyone know what they need to do to get full marks on the question.

## Courses and Films

Because of my positive early experiences using short films in exams, I have been repeating this practice with several undergraduate courses now for over a decade. Most of these are not courses on film. But they *are* courses

that involve various ideas, theories, and perspectives on religion. Here are examples of short-film exam questions from three courses I have taught in the past two years (and many times before).

## Introduction to the Study of Religion

This is a large first-year course of 300 to 450 students that offers a brief summary of the field, including a number of theories. Many students in subjects like science and business take the course as one of their required humanities electives; I was a little worried that the film question would therefore be too challenging for many of them. But again, their scores on this question were higher than for the rest of the exam. Overall, they were demonstrating much stronger understandings of the course material when asked to put it into practice.

I teach this course twice a year, and so by a very wide margin this is the course in which I have used short films during exams the most. The exact question about the film changes in some details, but the basic idea is always that students are asked to write a few paragraphs analysing the film using theories from Malory Nye's *Religion: The Basics* (2008). There are six categories of theories, which correspond to chapters in Nye's book: Culture, Power, Gender, Belief, Ritual, Texts. Each analytical paragraph must use a theory that comes from a different chapter.

I have always used animated shorts for this exam, mostly from Pixar. I use these in part because it is an enormous class that writes the exam in a large hall and, as mentioned, animation tends to be more easily seen than live action. Pixar shorts often have complex, challenging content in even the briefest films while still being charming and often quite funny – an important point I will come back to later. I would say that all these qualities of Pixar shorts can be found, for instance, in *KNICK KNACK* (John Lasseter, US 1989, 4'). We see a snow person repeatedly fail to escape their snow globe imprisonment, then briefly succeed only to end up trapped back in the globe *and* in a fish bowl.

These are the films I have used over the years in the exam for this course:

LONG-HAIRED HARE (Charles M. Jones, US 1949, 7'36'')<sup>3</sup>

KNICK KNACK (John Lasseter, US 1989)<sup>4</sup>

BOUNDIN' (Bud Luckey, US 2003, 4')<sup>5</sup>

3 LONG-HAIRED HARE is available here: <https://vimeo.com/286432501>.

4 KNICK KNACK is available here: [https://youtu.be/9uhM\\_SUhdaw](https://youtu.be/9uhM_SUhdaw).

5 BOUNDIN' is available here: <https://youtu.be/7WyR4AqRweY>.

TOY STORY TOONS: HAWAIIAN VACATION (Gary Rydstrom, US 2011, 6')<sup>6</sup>

PURL (Kristen Lester, US 2018, 8')<sup>7</sup>

HAIR LOVE (Matthew A. Cherry / Everett Downing Jr. / Bruce W. Smith, US 2019, 7')<sup>8</sup>

## Indigenous Films and Healing

This is a small first-year seminar of around 20 students. In general about half of them are in a humanities program; half are in other disciplines and are taking this class as an elective. The course looks at how several Indigenous films frame Indigenous identity in relation to both Indigenous communities and to the larger settler populations where they reside.

A key focus of this course is to consider Indigenous cinematic responses to the historical and ongoing harm of colonialism and how these films might be part of the process of healing that needs to take place.<sup>9</sup> This focus, in turn, is where our consideration of “religion” comes from. Students complete different readings each week, mostly by Indigenous authors. But the main text for the course is Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew’s *Taking Back Our Spirits* (2009). Episkenew discusses many ways in which largely Christian colonial stories continue to facilitate colonial harm and how Indigenous stories can act as “medicine”, helping push back against this harm in various ways.

I have taught this course every fall since 2018, and each time I have shown the same documentary short in the exam: TWO SPIRITED (Sharon A. Desjarlais, CA 2008, 6').<sup>10</sup> In the exam, students are asked to think about the film using ideas from Episkenew’s book.

6 TOY STORY TOONS: HAWAIIAN VACATION is available on the Disney Vimeo channel, <https://is.gd/qeBLYk>.

7 PURL is available on the Pixar YouTube channel, <https://youtu.be/B6uuIHpFkuo>.

8 HAIR LOVE is available on the Sony Animation YouTube channel, [https://youtu.be/kNw8V\\_Fkw28](https://youtu.be/kNw8V_Fkw28).

9 In the course I focus on Canada as a specific example of colonialism, and so most of the films used are Canadian productions. Also, it is often easier for us to access Indigenous films made in this country. The main ones we have discussed for the past two years are (in chronological order): SMOKE SIGNALS (Chris Eyre, CA/US 1998); REEL INJUN (Neil Diamond / Catherine Bainbridge / Jeremiah Hayes, CA 2009); RHYMES FOR YOUNG GHOULS (Jeff Barnaby, CA 2013); GOLDSTONE (Ivan Sen, AU 2016); and FALLS AROUND HER (Darlene Naponse, CA 2018). Films that students have chosen to do their final projects on include ATANARJUAT: THE FAST RUNNER (Zacharias Kunuk, CA 2001); EMPIRE OF DIRT (Peter Stebbings, CA 2013); INDIAN HORSE (Stephen Campanelli, CA 2017); OUR PEOPLE WILL BE HEALED (Alanis Obomsawin, CA 2017); and MONKEY BEACH (Loretta Todd, CA 2020).

10 TWO SPIRITED was produced by the National Film Board of Canada, which offers the film free on its site: <https://is.gd/hySoS3>.

## Reel Religion

This is the course that first got me thinking about teaching religion with film. It is a larger third-year class with around 60 students. The focus is on using mostly popular, “non-religious” movies to understand various ideas about religion, and vice versa. One key reason for emphasising movies that are not obviously or explicitly religious is to raise the question of what we mean by “religion”. If Mary Douglas offers ways to understand religious beliefs and practices by thinking about categories like “chaos” and “order”, how is our understanding of “religion” impacted when her ideas are also wholly applicable to the *a cappella* communities in PITCH PERFECT?

And I am trying to generally help students get used to using theories with data. Which is where having a short film on the exam comes in. I have made several minor adjustments to the exam question about the short film, but it always takes some form of the following: Write a few paragraphs analysing the film using various theories of religion from the course. Students are always given several theories to choose from. Here are the short films I have used for this exam:

FOR THE BIRDS (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000)<sup>11</sup>

BAO (Domee Shi, US 2018)

SMASH AND GRAB (Brian Larsen, US 2019, 8')<sup>12</sup>

FLOAT (Bobby Rubio, US 2019, 7')

WIND (Edwin Chang, US 2019, 8')

## Questions and Answers

To provide examples of what some students can achieve, I looked up the highest scores on the film question from the exams in each of the above three courses over the past two years.<sup>13</sup> When grading answers to the short film questions, I take a consistent approach: I look to see if the student

11 FOR THE BIRDS is available on the Disney France YouTube channel, [https://youtu.be/dKeann\\_nWIs](https://youtu.be/dKeann_nWIs).

12 SMASH AND GRAB is available on the Pixar YouTube channel, <https://youtu.be/A4-G7YpSFb4>

13 I contacted the students who wrote the answers provided. All graciously gave permission for their work to appear here, and all asked that their names be used. Thanks so much to Lordee, El, and Simran for allowing me to include their answers in this article.



demonstrates a correct understanding of the theory (at least to the extent we have discussed it in the course), applies it thoughtfully to the film, and supports their analysis with clear, relevant evidence. As with any essay, a “perfect” response is virtually impossible; there is invariably room for at least some improvement. That said, all of the answers below received an A grade.

Because these exams were written online, students were given permission to use notes and texts and in some cases were asked to provide page references. For in-person exams such references, as well as exact quotations from course texts, are obviously impossible.

## HAIR LOVE

Course: Introduction to the Study of Religion

Term: Winter 2021

Student: Loriee De Villa

HAIR LOVE is about a young Black girl (Zuri) and her father struggling to style her natural hair. The father is *bad* at this, and the first attempt does not end well. The girl starts watching videos of a woman – who we later learn is her mother – giving instructions and advice about styling hair. The father overhears and then follows the instructions, working *with* his daughter’s hair rather than against it. Success! The two leave to visit mom in the hospital, where we see that she is bald now. They all go home, and during the credits we are treated to images of the three of them having fun together working on everyone’s hair (including the cat’s!).

The exam question included brief descriptions of several theories, and students had to use five of them to analyse the film. One of the theories was Pierre Bourdieu’s challenging concept of “habitus”, as explained by Malory Nye in his chapter on belief. We had studied this theory during the term, and I provided a brief explanation as part of the exam question: Pierre Bourdieu developed the idea of habitus. According to Bourdieu, beliefs are strongly influenced by “the cultural context in which people live and practise their lives” (Nye 2008, 125). As Nye explains, however, people are not “programmed” by their environments; they still have agency, and may choose beliefs that are different from those around them (126).

Here is one student’s exam paragraph using the idea of habitus to think about belief in HAIR LOVE. I think Loriee does a great job of identifying (but not overstating) a possible belief in the mom’s response to her own reflection and in connecting this belief to a culture in which we see her operating



Fig. 2: Shifting hair habitus: a celebration of Black women's hair that includes the drawing Zuri makes of her mom, bald with a crown. Film still, *HAIR LOVE* (Matthew A. Cherry / Everett Downing Jr. / Bruce W. Smith, US 2019), 00:00:04.

earlier in the film. She also takes care to bring up both agency and a shifting habitus in the story's end (fig. 2).

Now, because *Hair Love* is by *Sony Pictures Animation* and not *Disney Studios*, we have a fresh plot twist – the mom is actually alive! Unlike in *Finding Nemo*, Zuri still has both parents around, with her mom fighting (what I assume to be) cancer, in the hospital. The scene is bitter-sweet, with the bitter part coming from the mom's reaction when she sees her reflection in the glass window, touching the scarf on her head. It seems that she doesn't want to accept the fact that her hair is gone and possibly believes that having hair is a big part of what makes her beautiful. This belief could possibly be explained through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus because it seems to be a product of the cultural context in which she used to live in. When I talk about cultural context, I think it's easier to see it as the environment she used to be a part of. Before her sickness, her hair was a key component in something important to her – her video channel. On the video list, the titles describe the hairstyles in a positive light, titled, "The Perfect Afro" or "Beautiful Twists", etc. The film also opens up with pictures on the wall, most of which are women with beautiful hair – perhaps models. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that Zuri's mom was a part of the online beauty community, specifically a hairstyling community. In a place where others showcase beauty through hairstyles, it's not surprising to have the belief that having hair auto-

matically means you're more beautiful. However, (and this is the sweet part) people are not confined to the beliefs of those around them; they still have agency! Afterwards, Zuri gives her mom a lovely picture of a bald woman wearing a crown, possibly helping the mom realize her own beauty and remove the scarf.

## TWO SPIRITED

Course: Indigenous Films and Healing

Term: Fall 2021

Student: Elissa Chrapko

As mentioned above, I have used only one film for this exam: TWO SPIRITED. The documentary is a wonderful account of Rodney “Geeyo” Poucette (Chiniki), a two-spirited jingle dancer from the Stoney Nation in Alberta (fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> “Two-spirit” is a modern term used by some Indigenous people to describe those who fulfil a traditional third-gender (or gender-variant) ceremonial role in their communities. But many of the traditions related to two-spirited people have been seriously harmed by colonialism. The film shows Poucette successfully resisting prejudices against two-spirited people within his own Indigenous community as his grandmother explains that these biases arose from Christian, colonial views.

In the exam, I ask students to write a short essay identifying ways in which Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) might see this film as a kind of “medicine” that helps promote healing for some Indigenous viewers. Ways in which stories can do this that Episkenew talks about include offering critiques and truths about colonialism on the one hand, and affirming the value of traditional practices and ways of knowing on the other. In their exam essay paragraph below, Elissa focuses on Episkenew’s point that healing cannot

- 14 Jingle dancing is an Anishinaabe healing ritual begun around 1900 and generally performed only by women (Marshall 2021; Thiel 2007). The term “two-spirit” is not a traditional one but an English word adopted by consensus in 1990 at an international Indigenous gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is sometimes mistakenly understood as referring simply to an Indigenous person who identifies as LGBTQ, but the term means more than this; most importantly, it points towards a traditional role within some Indigenous communities. For further information about the history and meaning of being two-spirit see Robinson 2020 and Wilson 1996. For a discussion of two-spirit people in relation to Indigenous films, including a brief commentary on Desjarlais’s *Two Spirited* (2008), see Estrada 2010.



Fig. 3: Identity and affirmation: Rodney “Geeyo” Poucette tells his story against a backdrop of jingle dresses. Film still *TWO SPIRITED* (Sharon A. Desjarlais, CA 2008), 00:02:27.

take place if people don’t know and value their true history. The student thoughtfully links this point to the way in which the film highlights the grandmother’s understanding of her community’s past.

In *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Episkenew states that white superiority is critical to our modern-day understanding of the world because the colonial side of history is gospel within our society’s power structure (Episkenew, 3). She believes that understanding a culture’s creation story and unique history is imperative in order to understand and respect its culture in an unbiased manner (Episkenew, 2). This claim is affirmed in *Two Spirited* by Rodney’s grandmother who explains that Indigenous cultures had specific names for Two-Spirited people prior to colonial contact, but have since learned to “judge and condemn” those who identify as Two-Spirited. Rodney shares the stories his grandmother had told him about the “blessing” that Two-Spirited people used to be in Indigenous communities, often taking roles as “holy people” and being treated with the utmost respect. In sharing these stories of Indigenous history and perspective, both Rodney and his grandmother affirm Episkenew’s idea that colonial history has fundamentally shifted our mindset and we must stay open minded to sharing Indigenous history and truth in order to heal and feel seen in today’s evolving world.

## BAO

Course: Reel Religion

Term: Winter 2021

Student: Simran Navita Persaud

The Pixar short *BAO* opens with a Chinese Canadian woman in Toronto making steamed buns (*baozi*). One of them comes to life, and she raises it as her son. But the *bao* sees her as overprotective and becomes resentful. He behaves cruelly towards her (fig. 4). When he is grown, they have a fight, and – shockingly – the mother *eats* him. She's immediately filled with remorse and cries. However, it turns out that the bun wasn't literally alive and the woman has a human son. Their relationship is strained, but they reconcile. In the end, they make *baozi* together.

Students were asked to write five analytical paragraphs about this film using five different theories. Students could choose any theories at all from the course. One of these was Katherine Fowkes' (1998) hypothesis that ghost comedy films use their supernatural premise to (perhaps unintentionally) offer a surprisingly subversive perspective on gender. Most ghosts in these movies are men, but in becoming ghosts they essentially take on qualities assigned to women in film: they are rendered unseen, unheard, and unable to *act*. Often they are confined to the home. Before dying, the men are often seen struggling with problems caused by stereotypically male traits: for instance, being unable to show or discuss emotions, which disconnects them from the people they care about. Becoming a ghost makes them realise that their priorities in life were skewed. They get in touch with their feelings, they take time for their loved ones. In effect, for the men to solve the important problems they faced while living, they must in certain key ways become "female" after death.<sup>15</sup>

As the student notes in her answer below, *BAO* is not a ghost comedy. However, the transformation of the son into a bun, even if only in the mother's imagination, is similarly supernatural. And while there are important differences – the son is more distant and "male" when he is transformed, and more emotional and "female" when human again – Simran insightfully points to critical similarities in gender dynamics within this film and the ones that Fowkes discusses.

15 Fowkes (1998) draws on dozens of films to illustrate her thesis. The main one she references – which functions almost as a template for the case she is making – is *GHOST* (Jerry Zucker, US 1990).



Fig. 4: A streetcar named gender roles: mom offers food and connection, son pushes her away. Film still, BAO (Domee Shi, US 2018), 00:03:07.

From Fowkes' text, "Such dichotomies can also be seen in ghost comedy films, which draw heavily on the supposed difference between the masculine and feminine: for example, visible (penis)/invisible (lack of penis); active/passive; language/ineffability; exterior/interior; world and business/house and home; rationality/irrationality and emotion; and reason/intuition" (Fowkes, 23). Although the video is not a ghost comedy, the parallels of the portrayal of men and women in ghost comedies is very evident in the short video. In some capacity the illusion of the son being a steamed bun could relate to the concept of ghost films in which the mother presents characteristics of being "passive, within the home and emotion filled," while her son represents the traditional male qualities that oppose the role of women (Fowkes, 23). The video shows the audience how the son walks all over his mother while she presents qualities of always cooking for him, being at home and does not voice her concerns until the end (Fowkes, 23). Fowkes also notes, "This change in gender position is further supported even by films that do not feature a ghost per se, but do involve returning souls" (Fowkes, 25). In the video we do not see the son truly evolve until he realizes how he has hurt his mother and addresses his emotion by returning to her to amend their relationship (Fowkes, 25). The expression of emotion is typically presented by the



women (Fowkes, 23). However, in order to achieve the “returning souls,” once the illusion of who her son had been was eradicated only then could they mend their relation (Fowkes, 25).

## Trauma and Learning

As with most teaching strategies, it can be hard to know for sure if what we are doing is actually working or whether it just *feels* like it is working. Even student course evaluations – which are notoriously problematic anyway – are not helpful at all to me regarding any aspect of exams, since at my school these evaluations are completed before the exam period begins. Using short films for exams can be objectively helpful, though, such as the advantage of being assigned an exam hall for my course alone. This makes the experience of writing the final much calmer and quieter. Also, having students apply ideas to a film that is new to them reasonably indicates how well they actually understand the ideas and can use them meaningfully. Such a question tells us much more than ones asking simply to describe a theory or define a term. This point harkens back to a key feature of Bloom’s classic taxonomy, in which remembering information is the first basic step of learning, followed by understanding, application, and analysis.<sup>16</sup>

Much more subjectively, several students have said to me over the years that they *enjoy* the short film questions and find preparing for them helps their understanding of the course material. I rarely hear this about other exam questions! Also, I have given this kind of question to well over 8,000 students in the past decade and I have never received a single complaint about it. That lack of data is perhaps more meaningful considering that in every course I teach I use a website that allows students to send me anonymous messages at any time during or after a course. Some use this opportunity to say very nice things that they might otherwise not feel comfortable stating in person. Others definitely do not hesitate to express their criticisms.

Aside from the problems discussed at the start of this paper that I initially ran into and then resolved, the only downside I have encountered to using short films in exams is the occasional technical snafu. Otherwise, I have

16 Anderson/Krathwohl 2001.

genuinely found no reasons *not* to do this. I'm confident that short films can be productively used in any course oriented around ideas meant to understand humans in some way. And possibly they can be used in many more besides. But there are other advantages to this approach that are both academic and more-than-academic.

Just before the pandemic closed our university in March 2020, I learned about trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) from a colleague.<sup>17</sup> The timing was extremely serendipitous, given what we were all about to face. TIP recognises that trauma inhibits learning and that many people are experiencing trauma at any given moment. Helping students learn therefore means attending to their well-being. To do this means fostering an environment focused on:

- safety (help students feel valued, and free to make and learn from mistakes),
- transparency (be clear, consistent, and reliable),
- support (provide needed resources and help students build on their strengths),
- collaboration (work *with* students so that everyone is learning and helping others learn),
- empowerment (build in flexibility and choice whenever possible),
- equity (be inclusive, and both aware of and responsive to intersections of privilege, power, and oppression),
- growth (emphasise abilities over deficiencies, and facilitate development).<sup>18</sup>

The pandemic made most of us more concretely aware of student trauma than we had been before. As we moved to online teaching and learning, I strove to keep the newly learned principles of TIP in mind.

As it turned out, the way in which I had been using short films during exams already embodied several TIP ideas. For instance, showing brighter films and providing the screenplay attends to inequities arising from accessibility issues. Giving students a practice video to work with creates a safe space for them to try out their ideas. Having them do this practice in small groups ideally points them concretely towards a source of support close at hand: other students. And posting a sample answer offers further support,

17 Thanks, Dr. Sarah Richardson!

18 These principles are adapted from Carello/Butler 2014. For further information and reflections on trauma-informed pedagogy, see Carello/Butler 2015; Imad 2020; McMurtrie 2020.



as well as transparency. Other ways in which using short films aligned with TIP were in fact reasons I had started using short films to begin with.

I had two main points in mind when I initially thought about adding films to exams. The first, as mentioned, was simply to include a question that reflected what students had been doing during the term: apply ideas about religion to a film. I did not particularly care which ideas they used or how they used them, as long as they demonstrated a good understanding of the concepts and supported their interpretations with reasonable evidence. This approach meant that they had several choices in terms of how to analyse the film and could focus on what they knew instead of what they didn't know. In turn, I found that grading their answers was enjoyable and educational – students often came up with wonderful readings that would not have occurred to me. This meant that the short film questions became an opportunity for *everyone* to learn. So, while I had deliberately designed the question to be open and flexible, I hadn't initially recognised that these qualities related to student empowerment and growth. And I further realised that I had accidentally included collaboration into the whole experience when I found myself learning from students' analyses.

The second point I had in mind when using short films in this way was that exams are incredibly stressful, and this stress does not help students do their best. This is one of the few truisms of education.<sup>19</sup> Teaching is often complicated and mysterious and alchemical – many of us spend a good deal of time trying to figure out approaches that work, and then figure out how to learn if they really did work, and also figure out why some approaches work with some students sometimes but not with others at other times. But I believe we all understand that exams are a source of anxiety for many students. And I thought that seeing a short film, particularly if it is positive and light-hearted in some respect, would help ease some of this tension. This is one of the reasons I initially chose the scene from *HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE*: I knew most of the students would be familiar with the film or the book and might find that familiarity comforting. Many students explicitly told me afterwards that this was indeed what happened for them.

It also turns out that simply showing a film in an exam entirely changes the atmosphere of the room. It is helpfully disruptive to the status quo.

19 There are a *lot* of studies on the negative impacts of text and exam anxiety. Here is a small sample: Dawood/Al Ghadeer/Mitsu/Almutary/Alenezi 2016; Krispenz/Gort/Schültke/Dickhäuser 2019; Kumari/Jain 2014; Trifoni/Shahini 2011.

When I announce that the video is about to start, students look up from their papers and seem to kind of come back to life. Many of them smile. The whole thing feels, to be honest, quietly and joyfully subversive in the best pedagogical way.

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## Filmography

ATANARJUT: THE FAST RUNNER (Zacharias Kunuk, CA 2001).  
BAO (Domee Shi, US 2018, 8').  
BOUNDIN' (Bud Luckey, US 2003, 5').  
EMPIRE OF DIRT (Peter Stebbings, CA 2013).  
FALLS AROUND HER (Darlene Naponse, CA 2018).  
FLOAT (Bobby Rubio, US 2019, 7').  
FOR THE BIRDS (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000, 3').  
GHOST (Jerry Zucker, US 1990).  
GOLDSTONE (Ivan Sen, AU 2016).  
HAIR LOVE (Matthew A. Cherry, Everett Downing Jr. and Bruce W. Smith, US 2019, 7').  
HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE (Chris Columbus, GB/US 2001).  
INDIAN HORSE (Stephen Campanelli, CA 2017).  
KNICK KNACK (John Lasseter, US 1989, 4').  
LONG-HAIRED HARE (Charles M. Jones, US 1949, 7'36").  
MONKEY BEACH (Loretta Todd, CA 2020).  
OUR PEOPLE WILL BE HEALED (Alanis Obomsawin, CA 2017).  
PITCH PERFECT (Jason Moore, US 2012).  
PSYCHO (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1960).  
PURL (Kristen Lester, US 2018, 8').  
REEL INJUN (Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge and Jeremiah Hayes, CA 2009).  
RHYMES FOR YOUNG GHOULS (Jeff Barnaby, CA 2013).  
SMASH AND GRAB (Brian Larsen, US 2019, 8').  
SMOKE SIGNALS (Chris Eyre, CA/US 1998).  
TOY STORY TOONS: HAWAIIAN VACATION (Gary Rydstrom, US 2011, 6').  
TWO SPIRITED (Sharon A. Desjarlais, CA 2008, 6').  
WIND (Edwin Chang, US 2019, 8').