



3 Strategies for Philosophy of Film

Films can be a powerful and immediate stimulus for philosophical enquiry. For teenagers, you could explore “How should I live?” using *Groundhog Day*, or “How do I know what is real?” using *The Truman Show*. At primary level, children’s visual literacy is often more advanced than their written literacy, so films aimed at children promote deeper understanding of many texts and topics.

When we visit schools, we ask for topics in advance so we can demonstrate P4C with what the children are already studying. I noticed that [Priory Primary School](#), where I am today, makes great use of films from Reception upwards. My planning for today forms the basis of this bulletin.

Here are three common features of children’s films to use as stimuli for P4C:

1. Life Lessons

Children’s films often feature authoritative adults who command the children to behave in a certain way, sometimes under the banner of ‘teaching them a lesson’. Rebellion against these is often where the fun starts.

Example: *Nanny McPhee* comes with 5 lessons for the children to learn:

- Always go to bed when you’re told
- Always get up when you’re told
- Always get dressed when you’re told
- Always listen
- Always do as you’re told

Activity: Ask pupils to order the lessons in an order (importance? fairness? – for deeper interest, be vague and leave it to them to decide “in order of what”). Alternatively, ask for examples of when it is acceptable to break the rule, or disobey the command. Or experiment with negating the rules in different ways. For example, would it be good to never go to bed when you’re told, or to go to bed when you’re not told.

2. Fantastical Thinking

Another dependable feature of children's films is the fantastical – otherworldly things that break a law of science, or ridiculous things that would never be seen in everyday life.

Example: In *Mary Poppins*, where they jump into the paintings, or when she removes the various items from her bag (I always remember the hat-stand), or inventing 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious'!

Activity: Put the children in the shoes of the characters and ask what they would do, using their answers as as a light-hearted springboard to deeper, more conceptual questions:

If you could jump into a painting, what would it look like? (*What makes a landscape beautiful? Can humans make things as wondrous as nature?*)

What would you have in your bottomless-bag? You can, as a fun warm-up, have pairs taking it in turns to pull imaginary objects from an imaginary bag, naming them as they go – Golf club! Fishbowl! Kangaroo! etc. (*What makes an object useful? Why do we enjoy thinking about things we know can't happen?*)

If you could invent a word, what would it be? (*How can something go from a made-up word to a real word? Who should decide? Should anyone decide?*)

3. Moral Musings

Wise characters will often come up with philosophical thoughts themselves, usually in a more solemn moment towards the end of the story, when they are reflecting what's happened. It might give the viewer/reader something to think about. It may be more common in films that have been adapted from books, such as:

Example: The book *The BFG* has been adapted into two very good films, and it's likely to be taught through both page and screen, so I use the text below.

I is not understanding human beans at all,' the BFG said. 'You is a human bean and you is saying it is grizzling and horrigust for giants to be eating human beans...But human beans is squishing each other all the time,' the BFG said. 'They is shootling guns and going up in aerioplanes to drop their bombs on each other's heads every week. Human beans is always killing other human beans.'

He was right. Of course he was right and Sophie knew it. She was beginning to wonder whether humans were actually any better than giants."

Activity: The heft of a thought like this means all we really need to do is turn it into a simple, easy-to-grasp question which invites children to use evidence from both the story and the real world. In this case: *Are humans any better than giants?* Sometimes simple questions invite inventive answers and deep thinking that surprises adults.

You could check the films you're using later this year for any of the above, but it's also rewarding when you spot them live and enjoy some impromptu philosophy.