

Retrospection through film – TCI and cinematic education

Der Film blickt zurück – TZI und Filmbildung

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How can cinema contribute to the “emancipation of emotional life” (Ruth C. Cohn), how can its inclusion in group processes promote growth? This article examines how we can reflect on the emotional experience of cinema together and what sort of unconscious dynamics are created when we do. Based on the Four-Factor Model, the disturbance postulate, and scenic understanding (according to Alfred Lorenzer), the author puts forward the thesis that engaging with films emotionally contains significant educational potential. Film thus functions as an “overlying exemplum” (Helmut Reiser) enabling self-reflective speech under the protective umbrella of film. Finally, methodological impulses are identified. They strengthen the I-factor and recognise emotional resonances as educational moments.

Me at the cinema

A woman and a man have to say goodbye to each other; they have known each other since childhood. He lives in South Korea, she lives in the USA. They see each other again after decades. They have always felt something for each other, they both know that. But their lives remain separate. A farewell that means that a life together will never be. He gets into the taxi. She stays behind.

I feel a feeling rising inside me.

Slowly, she walks to the door of her flat. Her husband is sitting there.

The feeling bubbles up inside me.

A wordless embrace. She bursts into tears.

It rises up through my chest, into my throat, until it pierces my eyes.

It is a moment of complete recognition: the husband knows what this man from South Korea means to his wife. She is overwhelmed by pain.

No jealousy. A hug that says: I've got you.

I can't help it, the feeling is stronger than my composure. I cry.

All this in just a few minutes on the cinema screen.

I shrink into my cinema seat, wanting only to be alone, completely by myself.

I remain seated through the entire credits.

The lights come on, I leave the theatre and step out into the night.

The tears subside, even if they don't dry.

Isn't it crazy? A film is something distant from me, a fleeting play of light on the screen, intangible, staged, artificial, simply not reality. And yet it touches me. It speaks to something inside me. Like the scene described from the film PAST LIVES from 2023.

This article is not about romanticising cinema, but about its potential to bring people into contact with themselves. Film as an emotional experience leads us to fundamental questions of theme-centred interaction: How can we transform individual experiences of the self into a

shared process of the we, and how can film as an object in a group process lead to deeper personal understanding?

The four-factor model of TCI and the disturbance postulate provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of film experience and post-film discussion. I would like to highlight an underrepresented dimension of film experience: the unconscious processes in film perception and post-film discussion. The concept of scenic understanding according to Lorenzer serves as a point of reference. This discussion reflects an excerpt from my research work and film education practice, so gaps are to be expected. At the same time, I want to offer practical suggestions for freeing film from the misconception that it is merely 'entertainment at the end of the day'.

Film and four factors

A film offers numerous opportunities for discussion. Let us consider the processing of a film in relation to the four factors of TCI:

On the id factor, films confront us with manifest content: What is the film about? What messages does it convey? The characters, their relationships and the themes that emerge determine this factor. In PAST LIVES, these are past relationships and separate paths in life due to work, migration and love. However, if a film discussion focuses exclusively on this factor, the film serves only as a stimulus for discussion and does not live up to its potential as an overall audiovisual production.

The I-factor reveals the subjective, emotional perception of the film. §1§ The film acts as a counterpart to which the I's must respond: What feelings does what I see arouse in me? What issues does the film raise for me personally? If these questions are addressed in a guided self-reflection and in a group discussion after the film, emotions can be brought to consciousness and mutual empathy becomes possible.

In film education practice, however, there is a tendency to deal with I-aspects in a purely cognitive way: asking people to express their opinions or judge the film. Such interventions lead to distancing and prevent a connection between the film experience and the individual. The I-factor is described in more detail later on in " " (Film and Education) as a moment in educational processes, particularly with regard to its unconscious aspects.

The "we" in the film discussion is the group dynamic negotiation process of different perceptions: How is the film negotiated within the group? Which interpretations are rejected, which are absolutised? Which scenes are remembered, which are forgotten? Who wants to share their emotions immediately, who remains silent? Are the constellations of characters in the film reflected in the group's interaction space?

Liveliness arises in the film discussion when an open, multidimensional view is sought. If the film is understood as an "open work of art" (Eco, 1977/1998), the viewers are always co-creators: the work comes to life in their interpretations. The opposite would be to agree on a single interpretation – often a symptom of suppressing uncertainty and avoiding non-understanding: once the film has been conceptualised, it is considered to have been thoroughly analysed.

The globe encompasses familiar aspects from other group interactions in the post-screening discussion, but is also crucial for engaging with the individual film experience. The screening situation plays a central role here: What are the technical conditions (image, sound)? What time and space resources are available? A film shown in a school context over two 90-minute blocks per week often impairs attention and immersion. Other questions are relevant for the director: How is the film introduced and thus the "globe of the film" expanded, e.g. through background information?

In addition, aspects of the film's scope are linked to the "we factor": What reactions are visible and audible during the viewing (laughter, crying, interjections)? These aspects influence perceptions and emotions.

In film education discussions, there are competing positions on how to weigh the individual factors. In a school context, the "it" factor often dominates:

This is often emphasised to such an extent that participants are expected to understand the film as an illustration of learning content (Bergala, 2006, p. 35). Bergala criticises this attitude towards film as "contentism". To put it provocatively:

Those who see Schindler's List should learn something about the Holocaust, not about themselves.

Another approach focuses on the aesthetic means of cinematic production. Here, stylistic devices and their effects become the subject of learning. Learners should learn to assert themselves in relation to media: these approaches have a critical and emancipatory aim of raising awareness of manipulation through films. Behind this lies the idea of a strict separation between film and viewers – film as an external construct opposed by an autonomous subject (Walberg, 2011, p. 68 f.). However, film is sometimes a confrontational medium that prevents viewers from retreating to a safe position. I observe that this challenging position enables a new experience of the self, which is often marked as a strange, new experience. For me, allowing, perceiving and understanding these experiences holds decisive educational potential: Ruth Cohn understood the perception and acceptance of feelings as a basic prerequisite for making responsible and congruent decisions (von Kranitz 2014, p. 252). I understand the film as "perception training" (von Kanitz, p. 252) of feelings – the film provides an opportunity to experience them, to perceive them and, at the same time, to experience the diversity of emotional responses in the group. The prerequisite for this is to design the film viewing and the follow-up discussion as an opportunity for growth, with an attitude that allows and tolerates introspection and thus, in Cohn's sense, contributes to an "emancipation of emotional life" (Cohn, 1975, p. 112, cited by Kanitz 2014, p. 252). This emotionally emancipatory film education is related to the third axiom, which links freedom of choice with intellectual maturity – I would add: with emotional maturity.

Allowing oneself to be drawn into the scene

'The film looks back': The idea that not only are we watching the film, but that the film is also 'looking' at us may seem strange at first. However, under the of this reversal, film perception can be constructed as an interactive context: it is not the viewer alone who projects conscious experiences and ideas onto the film, but the film specifically addresses unconscious layers such as desires or fears, some of which are difficult to access. In short: §2§ Similar to a dream, the film shows what I still am, beyond my conscious mind.

In this sense, Hamburger's statement hits the nail on the head: "It is the film that (by appealing to the unconscious) chooses the viewer" (Hamburger, 2018, p. 78) – the film recognises us in our unconscious desires and conflicts before we recognise ourselves in it.

The interaction between film and viewers can be viewed analogously to Lorenzer's concept of scenic understanding. Put simply, this refers to an understanding of a situation that focuses on the immediate relationship dynamics – on unconscious patterns and role attributions (Lorenzer, 1970). The fundamental assumption is that early experiences of interaction are unconsciously revived (re-enacted) in new relationship constellations.

In a psychoanalytic setting, this becomes apparent when a patient sees the analyst in the role of a strict authority figure against whom he must defend himself. This is initially a transference phenomenon, but it is not only manifested internally; it unfolds in the here and now between the two, e.g. in language and body posture.

With the help of scenic understanding, the analyst recognises a "resurgence of the unconscious conflict" (Hamburger, 2018, p. 68) in the patient. In the interaction between the film and the audience, a similar re-enactment takes place of what is latently troubling the audience. As viewers, we do not react merely as detached observers, but become involved as if we were in a personal relationship with the characters. What touches or repels us is connected to our own relationship experiences and patterns. In doing so, the film confronts us with prototypical constellations such as parent-child or partnership, which have the potential to be re-enacted by many people (Mikos, 2011). The scene may look the same to everyone on the surface, but its latent content is charged individually: What re-enactment could occur, for example, in the scene quoted at the beginning between viewers and the film PAST LIVES?

This phenomenon cannot be limited to the art form of film alone. However, film has aesthetic strategies at its disposal that flow directly into us as " " and whose effect we must experience affectively. According to Stiglegger, film is the most complex art form because it combines "photography, acting, literature, music, architecture, performance and choreography, design, sculpture, etc." "All these artistic forms of expression, brought together in synergy, merge into a new, holistic expression" (Stiglegger, 2023, p. 2). The spatial arrangement of the classic cinema also enhances the involvement of the audience through darkness, the projector behind their heads and the inevitable orientation of the seats towards the large screen. The "reality effect" thus created is often criticised in the tradition of ideology criticism as a regressive state (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2022, p. 85) – I, on the other hand, understand it as a prerequisite for viewers to become involved and for re-enactment to take place.

Distractions

The film is particularly suitable for addressing deeper layers without having to address them directly. It is important to note that we are taking a practical approach in an educational context. My aim here is to activate self-reflective forces within the group, not to offer therapeutic interpretations.

The film functions as an "overlying exemplum" – a term coined by Reiser that emphasises its educational intervention potential, especially when "unconscious inner psychological and group dynamic conflicts based on early childhood traumas, frustrations and maladjustments dominate the interaction" (Reiser 1995, p. 201). An overlying exemplum is a theme that addresses these conflicts without addressing the current group interaction, thus making it possible to work on them at a different level. What is special about film as an overlying exemplum is that when we talk about film characters, their conflicts and relationship constellations, we often implicitly negotiate our own relationship to similar situations. Film creates a protective distance that allows us to talk about emotionally significant topics without having to expose ourselves. A film discussion should focus on two types of moments of perception:

Firstly, on film scenes that evoke strong emotional involvement – scenes that trigger affects or have an immediate effect after viewing the film. Here, the three categories of audience perception are relevant: "1. the 'feeling': mostly physical sensations that also occur in connection with memories of previous experiences; 2. the 'affect': the involuntary reaction to an event, quasi object-related emotions [at the specific moment of film perception]; 3. the 'emotion': a mood that is not necessarily object-related" (Stiglegger and Wagner, 2021, p. 10; note P. R.).

On the other hand, there are moments that cause uncertainty or irritation: these can be understood as "disturbances of perception" (Walberg, 2011, p. 259). In line with the TCI postulate "disturbances take precedence", "disturbances of perception" are also something that is difficult to push aside. In moments of irritation, access to deeper issues can open up. According to Scenic Understanding, resistance – boredom, incomprehension, defensiveness – can point to unconscious scene complexes. §3§ Disturbances of perception encourage vigilance

for issues that point to relevant group issues, although this does not mean that all irritations should be viewed with suspicion.

Unarticulated visual disturbances, on the other hand, can lead to conflicts in the group process. Those who are attached to certain emotions find it more difficult to open up to others: "There is a serious difference between ignoring, trivialising or shifting to other levels what affects and captivates us, and whether there is an atmosphere in which the invitation 'Just say what's wrong' takes effect." (Langmaack 2011, p. 148). In the film discussion, this means creating a space for emotional resonance and irritation. The aim should not be to seek explanations immediately, but to perceive the irritation in all its complexity – including its physical dimension.

Focus on the I-factor: methodological approaches

The considerations presented so far on scenic understanding and visual disturbances can be translated into concrete methodological approaches.

Mirror phenomena in the group process

First, let us observe a fundamental phenomenon in film discussions: themes and conflict patterns from the film can be repeated in the group dynamics. Hamburger describes this as follows: "If the [group] is harmonious or argumentative, competitive or focused on cooperation [...] or if interpretations and identifications are irreconcilably pitted against each other, this may be the result of the scenic movement triggered by the film in the group" (Hamburger, 2018, p. 84). §4§ The group re-enacts what it has seen: After a film about exclusion, subtle mechanisms of exclusion may arise in the group or a tendency towards a need for harmony may become apparent; after a film about conflicts of authority, resistance to the leadership may form. The facilitator can recognise these mirror phenomena and gently bring them up – not as interpretations, but as observations. This enables the group to reflect on their own and collective emotional processes.

EPS – impression, person, scene

The EPS method (Helmke and Liedtke, 2014, p. 190) is used immediately after viewing the film and allows the participants' unfiltered responses to be recorded before they are overlaid by discussions or reflections. The method is based on three questions. I have tried this method and find the following modified questions particularly useful:

1. Impression: What was the strongest impression I have right now? This can be a word, a term or a short sentence – the first, immediate association.
2. Person: Which person in the film did I feel close to?
3. Scene: Which scene is in front of my eyes right now?

The participants first write down their answers for themselves. Then, what I call a 'sound collage' emerges from the strongest impressions: Everyone takes turns saying their impressions in a word or short sentence, which remain uncommented in the room.

The subjective storyboard

After watching the film, participants are invited to close their eyes and think about which moment or scene from the film comes to mind. Which image is most striking to them at that moment?

The participants then create an image of this moment. The resulting images are then arranged together in chronological order (according to the sequence of the film). This method has several special features:

1. The participants already make initial interpretations when designing their pictures, depending on style, colour scheme and composition.
2. By arranging the pictures, the film is retold in parts, while at the same time creating a structure for further discussion.
3. If certain scenes appear more than once, this indicates an important theme for the group.
4. Last but not least, this method is particularly close to film as an aesthetic form of expression, as it does not attempt to put the film experience entirely into words.

Psychodramatic elements – bringing the scene to life

This psychodramatic approach is particularly close to scenic understanding, as it not only captures the scene cognitively, but also makes it physically and emotionally tangible.

After identifying particularly relevant or disturbing scenes, participants are invited to re-enact these scenes from memory. Various variations are possible:

1. Re-enacting a key scene from memory to better understand its dynamics.
2. Alternative scenarios are developed: How could the scene have unfolded differently?
3. A constellation of characters is set up in which the participants can question each other.

This method is particularly valuable for working with visual impairments: §5§ Re-enacting an irritating scene can suddenly make it more accessible – not through explanation, but through physical experience. The meaning becomes clear 'from within'.

Credits

TZI aims to enable lively learning. Film can become a lively counterpart in which the self has the opportunity for self-exploration and negotiates a deeper understanding through interaction. It is not a matter of interpreting or even overcoming the participants' complex scenes. In line with the chairperson's postulate, the depth of the discussion should always be determined by the participants themselves. The chairperson supports self-exploration (of the group) through their interventions, but should refrain from interpretations and allow emotional depth to develop without forcing it.

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Call-Outs

§1§ The film acts as a counterpart to which the egos must relate.

§2§ Similar to a dream, the film shows what I still am, beyond my conscious awareness.

§3§ Disturbances in vision lead to alertness to themes that point to relevant group issues.

§4§ The group re-enacts what they have seen.

§5§ An unsettling scene can suddenly become more accessible when re-enacted.