

## *Notes from the Field*

# From the Cave to the Silver Screen: The Questions Raised by Moving Images

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**Translated by Irmak Ertuna Howison with Google Translate and ChatGPT**

Cinema has become indispensable to the world since the Lumiere Brothers shot the first film in the history of cinema, *Arrival of a Train*. While it promised a captivating experience for audiences, those in power sought ways to exploit cinema and found it relatively easy to do so. Even Hitler sought refuge in cinema during the 1936 Olympics, using Leni Riefenstahl's "Olimpia" to justify his power, achieving partial success. In essence, cinema served as a functional tool for power-building while continuing to captivate viewers as a remarkable spectacle. Beyond its role in power dynamics, cinema, often referred to as the "7th art," remains a means for artists to express themselves and share their creative productions with the masses. In my role within the education world, I observe that cinema, which has substantial intellectual value and global impact, is underutilized. Thus, in this essay I will endeavor to convey how I utilize cinema in the realm of philosophy for children—a subject I have been joyfully working on for some time.

### **Behind the Curtain**

After completing my 64-hour Philosophy for Children (P4C) training in 2016, I embarked on my facilitator training completion project within the Creative Drama Instructor Training Program offered by Istanbul Drama Arts Academy, focusing on "Philosophy for Children with Creative Drama Method." I developed content comprising 12 workshop sessions, primarily centered around mythological stories containing philosophical stimuli, dilemmas, or problems. These sessions were carefully structured to align with the flow of creative drama, incorporating improvisation activities for each. The practical application involved a group of 16 students aged 10-12 at the school where I worked as a Turkish teacher. Throughout and after this practice, I observed that the dynamics of creative drama, especially improvisations, tended to divert children from focusing on the philosophical stimuli. While warm-up games and other activities had a positive impact, their effectiveness varied among groups and, in some cases, caused certain groups to disengage from the process. Additionally, children could easily get "bored" in sessions where we followed a traditional storytelling approach.

In my quest for material that wouldn't distract children from the core philosophical questions and would enhance their focus, I recalled a legendary line from Star Wars spoken by Yoda: "Fear is

the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Even this single line sparked numerous questions exploring concepts/emotions and the thought dynamics behind them. For instance, questions such as “What is fear/anger/hate/pain?” or “Is there a relationship between these feelings as Yoda says or is it our interpretation?” and “Is it possible to not feel pain/fear/anger/hate in all situations?” could be used to build an inquiry. That’s when I started wondering if it was possible for me, as a facilitator and a cinephile, to use cinema as a source of P4C. Consequently, I started building my P4C sessions on fragments from films and series. One of the primary reasons for this phenomenon is that cinema often delves into philosophical inquiries that have preoccupied humanity since its inception, attempting to address them through various characters and eras depicted on screen. This presents an excellent opportunity for me to render philosophical investigations more engaging. When stories and heroes are conveyed to children via screens, they offer a swift and accessible means for young minds to connect with the narrative and its underlying questions.

The sessions of P4C, centered around the “Community of Inquiry,” founded by M. Lippman, consists of five basic elements: Circle, stimulus, main problem, dialogue, and inquiry and evaluation. The group gathers in a circle accompanied by a facilitator, starting with an open question based on a stimulus, then conducting a discussion (dialogue and inquiry) on the main problem, and concluding with evaluation. However, I can confidently say that among these five principles, the stimulus is by far the most important. As stated on the door of Warner Bros. studios, “Content Is The King.” In other words, a qualified and striking content deeply influences all inquiry dynamics. Based on this, I have implemented sessions I developed based on scenes selected from movies and TV series in P4C clubs that I run at schools, with approximately 70 children aged between 10-13 at different times. I carried out club activities once a week, for a period of 50 minutes, with groups of students from different grade levels (5th, 6th, 7th, 8th grades). For each quarter (8- or 9-week period), I chose sections from four movies, or we watched a movie in parts and discussed it from different perspectives for 2 or 3 weeks. I started each session with a small warm-up activity independent of the content. These games lasted approximately 10 minutes. In the remaining 40 minutes, I provided a 5-minute background information on the movie or TV series to be watched. I briefly introduced the subject, events and heroes. If it was a single scene, it was 5-7 minutes of watching time. Thus, approximately 20 minutes were left to discuss the philosophical issues. Finally, I devoted the last 10 minutes to evaluation in each session. Here, I would like to open a small qualification: ideally, I would have preferred to continue this work as part of course content rather than sporadic club activities, since I cannot reach as many children when done as a club activity. Unfortunately, thinking and learning to think are not considered as crucial as other “academic” courses in my country. That’s why I had to continue these practices with a relatively small number of students. Nevertheless, it offered me a great development opportunity.

### **And the Curtain Opens**

While preparing the content, I initially chose scenes from blockbuster movies like *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *Lord of The Rings*, aiming for broad audience appeal. However, as time passed, I realized that introducing movies or series with a smaller viewership, or whose target audience wasn’t the age group with whom I had been working, had a more significant impact. Films designed for a vast

audience may not capture children's attention as much as content they haven't seen before. Moreover, prior discussions among children or with adults about these widely known films could negatively impact their participation in the session. Consequently, I shifted towards discovering content that was unfamiliar to them, leading to the development of one of my projects, the framework of which I will explain shortly.

During a routine visit to my favorite local bookstores, I stumbled upon Simon Stanlenhag's comic book *Tales from the Loop*. After glancing through the pages, I purchased the comic and delved into its contents. Stanlenhag, an author and illustrator, centers his work around the experimental physics research facility also known as "Loop," which was built in Sweden in the early 1960s, and remained operational from 1970 to 1994. His purpose in creating the work was to "portray in a personal, subjective, and sometimes entertaining way how it affects people and nature and what it is like to grow up in such an environment." The comic, which I quickly finished reading, left a profound impression on me with its surreal atmosphere. Further research on the illustrator revealed that the work had recently been adapted into a single-season series by Amazon Prime. Without wasting any time, I watched the series and identified content from it that could serve as stimuli in two distinct P4C sessions. While these contents were also present in the comics, the impact of both adaptation and visual presentation made them even more striking. The session I will discuss here revolves around the second episode of the series titled "Transpose."

"Transpose" unfolds through the narratives of two close friends, Jakob and Danny Jonsson. Jakob, characterized by high intelligence and a strong artistic side, possesses weak social and physical skills. In contrast, Danny, described as handsome, excels in social and sports skills but lacks academic and artistic abilities. During a forest walk, they encounter a piece of the loop—a spherical capsule with a front door. Initially unsure, Jakob succumbs to Danny's insistence and enters the object, leading to a dark screen. In the subsequent scene, an unconscious Danny lies on the ground as Jakob emerges from the sphere. It becomes evident that their bodies have been exchanged, causing panic for Jakob, who reenters the sphere. Returning to their original bodies, the friends realize the transformative power of the sphere. Despite initial fear, they decide, upon Danny's insistence, to swap bodies "for one day." However, this temporary arrangement becomes more permanent as Danny, now in Jakob's body, refuses to return. The episode explores the conflict arising from this unexpected change, delving into questions of identity and self-discovery. I chose this episode to address the universal question of "who am I?" through a physical transformation. Adolescents, particularly concerned with physical appearance, often perceive it as the most crucial aspect of identity. Exploring this content with them seemed meaningful.

"Transpose" is a 55-minute episode. I only used approximately the first 20 minutes during the session. Thirteen children, mostly 7th-grade students, participated in the session. The group had a balanced gender distribution, and as I had conducted P4C sessions with them before, they were familiar with the basic dynamics. No warm-up games were played before the session; instead, I talked about the comic book of the same name, "Stories from the Loop", which inspired the series. I introduced the book and gave them time to review it. After a review, I answered questions about the comic's reality about whether the setting was real or whether it's a secret military base. Before delving into the investigation section on "Transpose", I asked the children: "Who are you and what do you

want?" Most responses were ordinary, with many stating their names and expressing desires related to exams, school success, or video games. I then showed the opening scenes where characters are introduced. After these initial scenes I stopped the video and posed the question, "Which of these two characters would you like to be?" Male students mostly chose Danny, while girls leaned towards Jakob. When I asked them what influenced their choices, girls indicated that they chose Jacob because of his interests and skills, while boys said that they picked Danny because he was popular with girls.

After completing the introduction, I presented the students with the scene that was the focus of the stimulus and proceeded to ask them the following questions:<sup>1</sup>

- What would you do if you and a friend came across such a machine and were in the same situation? Would you use the machine? Why?
- What is the relationship between our identity, that is, our character, and our body (physical features)?
- Can our character be considered independent of our physical features?
- Do we take our physical features into account when defining our character?
- When answering the question "Who am I?", can we think of a self-independent of our physical characteristics?

My students provided the following answers to these questions:

- In response to the first question, all of them expressed that they would certainly use the machine, citing the possibility of returning. They saw it as an opportunity for an exciting experience without major consequences.
- Regarding the relationship between our body and character, some students argued that our body merely carries our character or soul and is not very important. However, others contended that the body directly influences one's character. They suggested that if someone becomes disabled due to an accident, there would be a psychological impact, establishing a strong connection between the body and character.

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<sup>1</sup> The training I received in Turkey was on the P4C method and not the PWC. During the training sessions, we learned that the primary distinction between these two pedagogical approaches lies in how philosophical problems are introduced to children. In P4C, the facilitator presents the philosophical problem within an appropriate context to the children. In contrast, in PWC (Philosophy with Children), the problem emerges from group discussions after the concept has been established. In the training I underwent, it was emphasized that in traditional P4C courses, the facilitator typically determines the question. Consistent with this approach, I prepared the questions myself, as I had observed in previous training sessions.

- While a group of students asserted that it's not possible for character to be independent of physical features, another group argued that character is entirely separate from physical attributes. One student cited the transformation process of Danny and Jacob as an example, highlighting that despite the body swap, they faced similar challenges, using this instance to support the idea that character is independent of physical features.
- Initially, all students answered negatively to the question of whether physical features are considered when defining character. However, one student changed their perspective, stating that beauty or handsomeness, while physical features, significantly influence character. The student justified this view by explaining that attractive individuals are admired, and admiration can lead to arrogance.
- The last question served as a session evaluation. Some students argued that one's character should remain independent of physical properties. Others contended that, after the discussion, it became evident that answering "Who am I?" while ignoring physical characteristics is not possible. They asserted that the investigation itself was proof of this realization.

During the inquiry, students questioned each other, raised objections to one another's ideas, and generated new concepts by building upon each other's thoughts. I didn't conduct this study as individual conversations with each person. Regrettably, I didn't have the time or opportunity to replicate the same workshop multiple times with different students.

### **Final Words**

This workshop is one of my favorites when working with teenagers. I facilitated this inquiry with 6 different student groups. Adolescents, being in a developmental period where they are often focused on their bodies and occasionally feel controlled by them, are prompted to pause and contemplate, "Who am I?" It is particularly valuable for them to ponder where the concept of "I" begins and ends while seeking an answer to this question. They find relief in discovering, like many philosophical inquiries, that there is no singular "right" answer. Moreover, they come to realize that defining their sense of self within their friendship circles, often relying on physical characteristics, can significantly impact their approach, both for themselves and those around them.

When I reflect and assess on this session based on the participation of students from the various groups I have worked with, it becomes evident it has indeed been effective. My primary criterion for judging its effectiveness was: "Did my students actively engage in discussion by responding to the questions I posed regarding the introduced content?" If my answer to this query was affirmative, I deemed the content effective. After all, we cannot engage in philosophical inquiry with any child who does not voice their opinions or participate in dialogue. Regardless of the quality of the content, its value diminishes if there are no students willing to discuss and explore it. If a teenage student remains engaged with the learning environment, it indicates that something within it resonates with them and

fulfills their needs. Consequently, I tailored my content accordingly. I believe the primary reason for the success of the inquiry is that, through this stimulus, my students had the opportunity to discuss one of the major conflicts of their developmental period. This experience demonstrated to them that engaging in philosophy allows for a departure from the routine of daily life. In summary, I think my example helps to demonstrate that philosophy is beneficial for life and is achievable at any age and at any time.

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