

Reframing Minds: Film as a Catalyst for Critical Thinking in Arts Education

Anup Kumar Mitra

Department of English, Gopalganj Science and Technology University, Bangladesh

Bipploby Guha Tuktuki

Department of English, Ahsania Mission University of Science & Technology, Rajshahi

ARTICLE INFORMATION

The Faculty Journal of Arts
Rajshahi University
Special Volume-6
ISSN: 1813-0402 (Print)

Received : 28 January 2025
Received in revised: 27 April 2025
Accepted: 16 March 2025
Published: 25 October 2025

Keywords:
Counter-Narratives; Critical Media
Literacy; Cultural Relativism; Dialogic
Pedagogy; Postcolonial Theory;
Transformative Learning

ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of digital media necessitates a reevaluation of traditional educational approaches, particularly in Arts education, where fostering critical thinking skills is paramount. This write-up examines the role of film as a pedagogical tool for cultivating critical thinking, driven by the need for engaging, interdisciplinary strategies aligned with twenty-first-century learning objectives. It aims to inform educators and curriculum developers on how film can challenge and reshape student perspectives, thereby promoting analytical skills essential for interpreting complex social and cultural narratives. The review is framed by Marshall McLuhan's media theory (1964), which posits that "the medium is the message," illustrating how media influences perception, and the concept of 'edutainment,' combining education with entertainment to enhance engagement. Additionally, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1970) and John Dewey's experiential learning theory (1938) support the idea that active engagement and reflection are essential for meaningful learning. These perspectives guide the study's exploration of film as a medium that fosters critical thinking by stimulating curiosity and encouraging deeper understanding. Using a qualitative research approach, this paper synthesizes findings from scholarly articles, case studies, and theoretical papers on the impact of film in Arts education. The analysis reveals that film, when used effectively, enhances interpretive skills, fosters empathy, and enables students to critically engage with themes related to social justice, identity, and power. The study's findings underscore film's potential as a powerful tool in Arts education, urging educators to adopt it to foster diverse perspectives and critical thinking.

Introduction

Students today engage with knowledge in ways that challenge traditional educational methods. In this visually driven digital era, film is a powerful teaching tool, especially for developing critical thinking skills in arts education. However, many educators still treat films as supplementary or purely entertaining, rather than as subjects for rigorous study. Golden points out that "teachers are showing film. But in terms of giving kids the language to talk about and learn film, there's very little pedagogy going on" (Golden, cited in Loewus, 2013). The research investigates educational methods that help instructors apply films to teach critical thinking skills in arts education. By combining existing research and theoretical frameworks, I hope to give educators a deeper understanding of film's potential to develop students' analytical capabilities and broaden their perspectives. This research addresses a gap in our knowledge of systematically using film as a critical thinking tool in arts education. Furthermore, it provides real-world advice to educators who want to improve their teaching approaches in the classroom.

Theoretical Frameworks

McLuhan's Media Theory: "The Medium is the Message"

Marshall McLuhan's groundbreaking work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), provides a fundamental framework for film's educational impact. His famous assertion that "the medium is the message" suggests that a medium's form becomes embedded in the message, creating a relationship where the medium influences how we perceive and understand the message.

McLuhan argued that media shape society not mainly through content but through inherent characteristics. In education, film's effectiveness comes from its stories and unique qualities as a visual, temporal, and narrative medium. Film combines visuals, sound, and emotional resonance, offering a multisensory learning experience distinct from reading text. According to McLuhan, such media encourage students to process information differently, leading to new forms of comprehension compared to single-media learning.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire introduces his critical pedagogy framework through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) to establish vital theoretical foundations for film-based critical thinking development. Freire criticised what he called the "banking model" of education, where students are treated as passive receptacles for knowledge deposited by teachers. His educational approach emphasised problem-posing education because it allows students to analyse and participate meaningfully with learning materials.

Freire was "a champion of what is known today as critical pedagogy: the belief that teaching should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo" (Currell, 2025). Applying Freire's ideas to film in arts education means students must do more than watch films- they must critically engage with them by questioning assumptions, analysing power and identity, and exploring alternative viewpoints.

Freire's emphasis on praxis- integrating reflection and action- also aligns with approaches combining film viewing with discussions, writing, creative responses, and real-world applications. This active engagement helps students develop not just analytical skills but also the ability to connect their critical insights to broader social issues and personal action.

Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory

John Dewey's experiential learning theory, emphasising "learning by doing" and problem-solving approaches, provides a third important theoretical foundation. Dewey argued that meaningful learning happens through experience and reflection, not through passive reception of information. De La Garza (2013) noted that Dewey was "a pioneer in the 'learning by doing' and 'problem solving' approach that sought to integrate school with society."

Film in education offers mediated experiences for students to reflect on and learn from, exposing them to diverse perspectives and situations beyond their own. Dewey's sociological learning perspective supports film-based methods, incorporating group discussions and collaborative analysis. These methods help students develop critical thinking and constructively engage with different viewpoints.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, specifically a systematic literature review, to explore how film stimulates critical thinking in arts education. Data was gathered from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles, books, case studies, educational reports, and conference proceedings. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns, guided by theoretical frameworks from McLuhan, Freire, and Dewey, which shaped the interpretation and organization of findings.

Results

Film as a Pedagogical Tool: Critical Viewing and Visual Literacy

People need critical viewing skills to analyse and evaluate visual media because our visual culture has increased dramatically. Film stands as the perfect learning environment to develop these competencies. The essential element of film literacy, which Loewus (2013) defines as "Critical viewing", surpasses basic display methods such as showing a movie, film adaptation of a novel, or simply playing the film. Like critical reading, it's a way of analysing the components of a text and the choices made during its creation."

One notable example is a study using the film "12 Angry Men" to develop critical thinking skills with adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The researchers found that the film

enhanced "the understanding of the students regarding critical thinking skills but in particular how to distinguish between facts and opinions" (Abbas & Salih, 2020). This fundamental critical thinking skill- separating fact from opinion- was made accessible through the narrative structure and visual storytelling of the film.

A quantitative study examining film's impact in Chinese university classrooms found "significant positive correlations between the Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) of film and television and student learning outcomes" (Zhao, 2024). This suggests that when students perceive film as a useful learning tool, it effectively enhances their educational outcomes, including analytical abilities. Research on TVbyGIRLS, a nonprofit organization supporting girls in digital storytelling, demonstrates how film production can be used for inter-faith dialogue and social justice education. Their project "Undercover," in which girls experienced each other's faith traditions, illustrates how film can serve as both process and product for critical engagement with diversity (Bischoff et al., 2011).

Studies on land-based art education show how film and visual media can help "critically assess settler colonial ways of sharing and making place via spatial-temporal injustice and the normalization of settler colonial logics" (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2024). This application demonstrates the film's capacity to challenge dominant narratives and foster critical examination of social structures. The meaning of visual content depends on visual elements such as framing, lighting, colour, and composition. By learning to "read" these visual aspects of film, students develop analytical skills that can transfer to other forms of visual media and broader critical thinking.

Film and Empathy Development

I have found that a film's ability to immerse viewers in diverse characters' experiences makes it particularly effective for developing empathy, an important component of critical thinking that enables students to consider multiple perspectives. As Schimmel (2024) observes, films can "enable students to gain a better understanding of, and empathise with, the life experiences of individuals and communities far removed from their day-to-day reality."

Empirical studies confirm that "film significantly improves empathy scores and emotional resonance through character connections". This finding is further supported by research on film therapy with university students, which found that "the average score of students' empathy on posttests (53.47) is significantly higher than before they received film therapy at pretest (48.00)" (Zaki, Amriyadi, & Klisnawati, 2024). This suggests that when properly facilitated, film viewing measurably increases empathic capabilities. Film presentations allow students to access unfamiliar perspectives and cultural experiences in a way that creates a personal emotional connection. The encounter with different points of view enables students to question their beliefs and learn more complex ways of analysing situations.

Integration with Curriculum

Effective use of film in arts education requires thoughtful integration with curriculum objectives rather than treating film viewing as a separate or supplementary activity. As Teaching Times (2023) notes, film "can be used to support social and moral understanding, to teach values and character, to support the development of information literacy in a visual world."

My research reveals four effective curriculum integration methods that combine film clips instead of complete movies for conceptual learning, the connection of movie analysis to educational material objectives, and guide structuring and assignment design that require learners to analyse film content using analytical tools. The combined teaching methods produce superior academic results compared to allowing students to watch films without an educational structure.

Pedagogical Frameworks for Film Integration

My analysis revealed three primary pedagogical frameworks for integrating film into arts education: structured analysis, comparative media, and critical inquiry approaches.

The structured analysis approach guides students through systematic examination of film elements, including pre-viewing activities, guided viewing, post-viewing discussion, formal

analysis tasks, and reflection on how form and content interact. As Golden suggests, teaching film literacy involves "giving kids the language to talk about and learn film" (Golden, cited in Loewus, 2013).

The comparative media approach positions film alongside other art forms and media to highlight similarities and differences in how they communicate meaning. This approach examines how different media represent similar themes, analyses adaptations across media, considers how medium-specific qualities influence meaning, and explores how different contexts shape media. This approach reflects McLuhan's insight that "the medium is the message."

Drawing from Freire's critical pedagogy, the critical inquiry approach uses film as a springboard for examining social, cultural, and political issues. This framework centres on problem-posing rather than information transmission, encourages questioning of assumptions and dominant narratives, examines representations of power and identity, connects film analysis to broader societal questions, and emphasises dialogue and multiple perspectives.

Impact on Critical Thinking Development

My research revealed three key ways film contributes to critical thinking development: enhanced analytical capabilities, perspective-taking and empathy, and media literacy. Studies documented improvements in students' analytical capabilities following engagement with film-based learning activities. These include greater attention to detail, improved pattern recognition, enhanced capacity to analyse symbolic representation, more sophisticated understanding of formal elements, and better synthesis skills. One study found that students who participated in structured film analysis demonstrated "improved ability to understand the deep symbolic meaning of a text" (Keigan, cited in Loewus, 2013).

Film's immersive qualities proved particularly effective in developing students' perspective-taking abilities. As Schimmel notes, films can enable students to "gain a better understanding of, and empathise with, the life experiences of individuals and communities far removed from their day-to-day reality" (Schimmel, 2024). Such understanding creates basic knowledge students need to progress toward deep analytical capabilities. Research findings indicated that media literacy skills improve when students learn through film because they study media messages critically. The learning experience enabled students to understand media constructions better than the actual reality. They learned to recognise persuasion strategies, gained skills to question sources, became more aware of biases, and developed more advanced contextual understanding. Critical media literacy is a fundamental skill in current-age critical thinking abilities.

Implementation Strategies

The analysis revealed four essential implementation strategies: carefully selecting films, gradually building skill in viewing activities, developing multiple response methods, and integrating media into the curriculum. Solid film selection methods combine learning objective appropriateness with content suitability and artistic level, including dual perspectives and multiple thematic depths. Film implementation projects developed carefully chosen film databases while featuring content selected from various time frames, cultural viewpoints, and filmmaking styles.

Strategic educational approaches to movie watching convert careless screening activities into purposeful examination procedures through preparation exercises, guided viewing materials, strategic stopping points for group discussions, and specific note-keeping systems, followed by multiple viewings of selected scenes. As one study noted, "critical viewing is more than just putting on a movie... it's a way of analyzing the components of a text and the choices made during its creation" (Loewus, 2013). Multimodal response activities enhance critical engagement through written analysis, creative responses, debate and discussion, production activities, and comparative analysis. These approaches align with Dewey's experiential learning theory and Freire's emphasis on praxis. Successful implementations also integrated film analysis with broader curriculum objectives by connecting film study to literary analysis, using films to explore historical contexts, examining ethical questions, analysing cultural representations, and developing cross-disciplinary projects. This integration positions film as an integral part of arts education rather than a supplementary activity.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The findings have three key theoretical implications. First, they affirm McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" while suggesting an extension of his theory in educational settings. While McLuhan characterised film as a "hot" medium requiring less active participation, the pedagogical frameworks I have identified transform film viewing into a "cooler" and more participatory experience through guided analysis and creative response. Teachers who focus on educational instruction can adjust the natural characteristics of media learning by developing strategic teaching methods.

The study outcomes show beneficial connections between Freire's critical pedagogy approach and current media literacy practices. His approach to questioning dominant stories and building critical awareness matches the goals of critical media analysis programmes. Students can achieve a Freirian learning model, emphasising autonomous intellectual development through movie-centred analysis of power representations. The research demonstrates how mediated learning happens when students derive meaningful educational experiences from film, even though it involves indirect rather than firsthand involvement. Thoughtful management of film experiences turns it into a meaningful learning activity, which includes reflective thinking and direct application instead of being passive.

Practical Implications

Based on these findings, educational administrators and teaching professionals can implement several practical outcomes. Proficiency and educational development sessions for teachers require strengthening, focusing on film interpretation skills and film instructional practices. Most instructors possess minimal training in examining films and developing instructional approaches. The professional development model should offer two components: film element technical knowledge and teaching techniques.

The study reveals that societies need better-structured methods to integrate film into their specified arts education guidelines—some educational standards reference film or visual media through brief allocations. Implementing a broader institutional framework would give films the status of multisensory works that deserve thorough independent assessment.

The research proves significant obstacles concerning resource availability and issues with resource distribution fairness. Successful film-based education depends on the availability of suitable content, technical equipment, and curricular time for implementing lessons and teaching resources. Schools facing budget constraints face challenges in executing effective film-based educational practices due to their resource needs.

Future Research Directions

Three key areas for future research emerged from this study. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of film-based approaches on critical thinking. Second, as media evolves, research should explore how film-based methods adapt to digital platforms, interactive media, and social video. Third, studies should move beyond Western contexts to examine diverse cultural perspectives on film, critical thinking, and arts education, potentially revealing new frameworks and approaches.

Conclusion

This study shows that film-based learning significantly boosts students' critical thinking in arts education when properly implemented. Supported by McLuhan's media theory, Freire's critical pedagogy, and Dewey's experiential learning, film enhances analytic skills, empathy, and media literacy. Effective integration requires careful film selection, guided viewing, diverse response activities, and teacher training in film analysis. Film offers unique opportunities to strengthen critical thinking as digital media use grows, suggesting untapped potential for arts education.

References

- Abbas, Z. I., & Salih, R. M. (2020, February 22). Beyond reasonable doubt: A case study of using movies to enhance students' critical thinking skills. In the 2019 International Conference on English Language and Culture (ICELC 2019) (Article ID: ICELC.142, 4 pages). Koya University. <https://doi.org/10.14500/icelc2019.efl142>
- Bae-Dimitriadis, M.S. (2024). Cultivating Art Inquiry Through Land-Based Thinking on Social Justice Art and Museum Praxis. *Studies in Art Education*, 65, 12 - 31
- Bischoff, C., Bullen, R.R., Nemer, M., & Quednau, R. (2011). In the Flow of Media, Religion, and Culture: A Case Study With TVbyGIRLS. *Religious Education*, 106, 384 - 397
- Currell, J. (2025, February 25). *Exploring critical pedagogy's pioneer Paulo Freire*. Maths – No Problem! Maths Mastery for Primary School Education. <https://mathsnoproblem.com/blog/teaching-practice/paulo-freire-pioneer-of-critical-pedagogy>
- De La Garza, A. (2013). Practice-Based Film Education for Children: Teaching and learning for creativity, citizenship, and participation. In *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks* (pp. 221–237). https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137032690_12
- Frykholm, J. (2020). Critical thinking and the humanities: A case study of conceptualizations and teaching practices at the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 20(3), 253–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022220948798>
- Loewus, L. (2021, April 27). Teachers look to film to foster critical thinking. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-look-to-film-to-foster-critical-thinking/2013/08>
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- Teaching Times. (2023, July 20). *Using Film & Movies in Education | Teaching Guides & Resources*. <https://www.teachingtimes.com/knowledge-banks/using-film-in-education/>
- Using films to encourage reflection and critical thinking in your teaching. (2024, October 1). *THE Campus Learn, Share, Connect*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/using-films-encourage-reflection-and-critical-thinking-your-teaching>
- Wikipedia contributors. (2025b, April 14). *Marshall McLuhan*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan
- Zaki, N. M., Amriyadi, S. M., & Klisnawati, J. (2024). The effectiveness of film therapy in developing empathy for university students in Faculty of Science and Technology UIN Raden Fatah Palembang. *Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences*, 3(2), 261–267
- Zhao, Y. (2024). Evaluating the Impact of film and television on student learning outcomes in Chinese university education: a quantitative analysis. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, 14(8), 1061–1067. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijiet.2024.14.8.2134>