

# The Image of a Philosophy Professor in Contemporary Cinema Art

## Revisiting the Problem of Teaching Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the problems of teaching philosophy in contemporary culture as they could be depicted in contemporary art, for example, Cinema Art. For the analysis of the new type of problems in the field of teaching philosophy, the author has chosen three films representing philosophers/philosophy teachers. The basic idea is that Art reflects hidden problems, which people sometimes take no notice of in real life. A film is a mirror in which one can recognize themselves; with the help of Art a person can view themselves from the outside, even though it might be not as pleasant as to think of oneself as a problem-free person. Three films: (1) “The Philosophers” (2013, USA, Indonesia), (2) “Irrational Man” (2015, USA) and (3) “The Philosopher” (2010, France) – represent three images of a philosopher, which are the most popular in contemporary culture: (1) a couch, (2) an irresponsible wrongdoer, and (3) a philosophical greatness dreamer. The conclusion of the brief analysis carried out by the author is not consoling: in contemporary culture, there are many temptations to relinquish to oblivion the ideals of the classical philosophical heritage and to use them exclusively for one’s own egoistic gainful purposes. In this context, teachers of philosophy should revise the foundations of their teaching activity and reanimate the high ideals of the moral principles of education by means of self-cultivating and setting an example of a worthy human person to their students.

*Keywords: philosophy, education, cinema art, didactics, couching, ethics, teaching, philosophy professor, “Irrational Man”, problem method of teaching philosophy*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of teaching philosophy has a rather long history. How to teach philosophy, which presupposes the incompleteness of the philosophizing process? Which conclusions of philosophical doctrines (and which doctrines) should be taught to students? Should philosophical conclusions be taught to them or should they be taught to philosophize and to reach these or other conclusions themselves? These and many other problems are currently being discussed in the periodical philosophy literature [1], [2], [3]. The negative attitude to courses in philosophy that some scholars note [4] is mostly formed by philosophers themselves: not eminent philosophers but those who teach philosophy in colleges and universities, and on this account call themselves philosophers. Consequently, they have become the foundation for the common image of a professor of philosophy. A long stay of philosophy in

this world cannot but inspire people of art to create a certain image of someone who is engaged in philosophy. In his comedy “The Clouds” [5], Aristophanes created a scandalous, discrediting image of Socrates as the empty-mouthed philosopher, which went down in history (largely due to a different orientation of Plato’s dialogues) as a certain incident, denouncing Aristophanes himself rather than Socrates. Great philosophers have often become objects of art. Their images highlight the true essence of both philosophy and the “bearers” of the title “philosopher”, so that people can better understand or at least feel their strangeness and the difference between them and ordinary people. These images of philosophers may appear to be funny, strange, boring, etc., but if they have a real person, a real philosopher behind, there is something about these images that does not allow placing them on a par with ordinary human beings, something that interferes with their genuine interest in philosophy and their calling.

In the modern world, when philosophy is often practiced mostly “because of the title” (e.g. a person

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defends a thesis, is invited to teach, because there is no specialist to do it, listens to lectures and decides they are able to teach it too, etc.). The image of a philosopher, that is, a person who teaches philosophy at schools, colleges, universities, is becoming average and impersonal: as a rule, a philosopher is not associated with a certain person, as there are too many of them – so many that it is possible to write essays on “the little man in philosophy”, as in Chekhov’s stories. Thus, there is a number of modern films that depict philosophy teachers (“The Philosophers”, 2013, USA, Indonesia, “Irrational man”, 2015, USA) more or less seriously, creating true to life images of philosophy teachers: anybody can find someone in their circle who will resemble one of these main characters. In contrast, there is another film about a “philosopher in the modern world” (“The Philosopher”, 2010, France), who, outside teaching, has rather strange prospects to fulfil himself as a philosopher. The film is more of a parody of a philosopher, some old-fashioned idea of what a philosopher should be, which, however, reveals unexpected consequences for European culture itself, its features, and its attitude to knowledge.

## **II. THE IMAGE OF A PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR IN “THE PHILOSOPHERS” (USA, INDONESIA, 2013)**

Let us look at these three films in more detail, starting with the film that presents the most optimistic and inspiring image of a philosophy teacher - “The Philosophers” (2013, USA, Indonesia). In the final examination in philosophy, students are invited to conduct a thought experiment, which is essentially an examination task. In a fictional situation of the end of the world, when the humanity is about to die, they have to select 10 out of 21 people to be sent to the bunker and further to revive the humanity and its cultural life. The examination consists in constructing logical argumentation that will justify the choice of saving these 10 people and the death of the rest of the group. James d’Arcy, a philosophy teacher, gives each student a card with their intended profession (a poet, a singer, an estate agent, a surgeon, a chemist, a stylist, an engineer, an electrician, etc.). Students have to decide who will be most useful for survival after leaving the bunker. As can be seen, the educational concept of philosophy directly correlates with the main trends of contemporary culture: knowledge should have practical application.

However, the philosophical component of the film leaves much to be desired, which has also been noticed by the various cinema critics. Meanwhile, what is important is how the philosopher (an average philosophy teacher) can find a use of this knowledge, how he can benefit society. This is what reveals the image of the philosophy teacher, which can be called a

provocateur or a coach. The function of philosophy is understood in the spirit of modern culture – to make another person think rationally in order to get a practical result and to solve a practical problem. It is necessary to solve practical problems quickly, based on reasonable arguments, including those that involve ethical implications. The teacher purposefully focuses the ethical component on common sense: ethics is subordinated to common sense, and common sense, goes beyond the instinct of self-preservation. In other words, philosophy is coaching, that is, the art of asking questions in such a way that the effectiveness and speed of achieving the goal increase significantly. Philosophy is what helps to achieve success, survive and rationalize that 10,000 should prefer one, even the best. Following this philosophy, Heraclitus would have probably had to be killed outright, before entering the bunker [6].

## **III. THE PRESENTATION OF A PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR IN “IRRATIONAL MAN” (USA, 2015)**

Another film, “Irrational man” (USA, 2015) creates an even less attractive image of a philosophy teacher. If in the first film there is an attempt to make philosophy the handmaid of common sense (in its American interpretation), in the “Irrational man”, a philosophy teacher is still trying to “philosophize” in the classical sense of this word. The main character, a half-alcoholic professor of philosophy, who has preserved his masculine attractiveness, moves to a new place, where he continues to suffer from depression, but in the company of a young student, fascinated by the depth of his philosophical views, sympathizing with him in his rejection of life and trying to inspire him. Having unwittingly overheard a conversation, they learn about an unfair judge, whom the professor decides to kill and thereby help a woman to get custody of her children after the divorce. His logic is simple and so is his reasoning, especially for those who have read Dostoevsky’s novel “Crime and Punishment”: “Am I a trembling creature or do I have the right”? Do I have the right to make this world a better place by killing a bad person? Apropos, the course, which the professor conducts at college, is devoted to Ethics.

In this film, despite the sounding names of the great philosophers like Kant, Sartre etc., there is no philosophy as such. The professor’s attempts to philosophize bring a condescending grin until he, the teacher of Ethics, and a diligent student have a dialogue in which the teacher is revealed to be a talker and demagogue avoiding real responsibility. In fact, this film shows that philosophy is literature, in a sense, which those who teach it bear no responsibility for: philosophy is a way of adaptation to real life, and quite a successful way. The film presents the image of a latent hysterical sufferer, named a philosopher, brutally attractive and slightly depressed, who delivers lectures

on Ethics but, in fact, does not understand how to behave in accordance with the pure ethical principles. Thus, he is a person, who behaves like an ordinary coward, not a philosopher [7].

#### **IV. THE PHILOSOPHY TEACHER IN “THE PHILOSOPHER” (FRANCE, 2010)**

The third film (directed by Abdullah al-Kaabi, France, 2010) is about a man who was willing to change his life and decided to become a philosopher. He got rid of all his possessions and gave his will to the first person he met in order to be able to free his head for great thoughts. The film presents the idealistic idea of philosophy and a person who was fascinated by his prospective glory and greatness. Of course, in a few days the “philosopher” got irritated with his life being built so vulgarly - the tutor he had found ordered him to watch television all days long. The film has a happy end, which shows the person, who managed to recover from this bad striving to get philosophical greatness and returned to the ordinary life with its modest pleasures [8].

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the above-mentioned films clearly shows the problems of teaching philosophy in schools, colleges, universities etc. The main problem could be summarized as the “dilemma of a philosophy professor”: should they follow the philosophical principles they teach in class in their real life or can a philosophy professor keep themselves aloof from any ethical obligations and as a consequence from any moral responsibility for what they do in real life?

The solution of this dilemma is the individual task for everyone who deals with teaching philosophy. Nevertheless, regardless of how this dilemma will be resolved, honesty to be who we are, not what we claim to believe in remains the main demand.

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