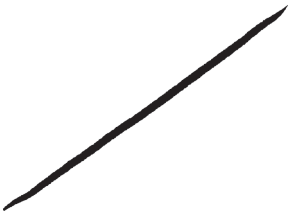


SEEN, TRACKED, AND TRYING TO
CONNECT: **DIGITAL INTIMACIES
AND YOUTH SURVEILLANCE** IN
CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Abstract: This paper examines how recent documentary and mockumentary films portray the tension between constant digital connection and emotional disconnection in young people's everyday lives, and how these representations contribute to a broader pedagogy of media awareness. Through a comparative analysis of *Imaginary Youth* (2024), *I Am Gen Z* (2021), and *The Price of Cheap Rent* (2022), the study explores how screen media may teach viewers to recognize the emotional, social, and ethical implications of digital life shaped by surveillance, algorithmic culture, and the commodification of intimacy.

Imaginary Youth, a Romanian observational documentary directed by Ruxandra Gubernat, offers an intimate portrait of three teenagers navigating European mobility and digital modernity. The film functions as a subtle pedagogical tool, encouraging reflection on how digital culture mediates self-expression, aspiration, and vulnerability. In contrast, *I Am Gen Z* presents a data-driven critique of life online, revealing how algorithmic curation and social media validation loops affect mental health and identity formation. Finally, *The Price of Cheap Rent*, a satirical mockumentary, parodies influencer culture and performative intimacy, turning its critique into a reflexive pedagogical commentary on the culture of visibility. Together, these films reveal cinema's capacity to cultivate critical awareness of the affective and ethical dimensions of contemporary digital life.

Keywords: film pedagogy, media literacy, digital intimacy, documentary film, mockumentary, Generation Z, social media, Romania.

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Introduction

In an era marked by persistent digital connectivity and an expanding culture of surveillance, young people occupy a paradoxical position: hyper-connected through screens and platforms, yet increasingly vulnerable to emotional disconnection, algorithmic control, and the erosion of privacy. The concept of "digital intimacy", which refers to the ways people build and maintain emotional and affective relationships through digital means, has gained attention across disciplines, intersecting with concerns about mental health, self-image, performativity, and online surveillance. For today's youth, particularly those raised in the social media era, digital platforms have become not only tools for communication but also structures through which identity is formed, emotions are mediated, and social belonging is continually negotiated.

This paper examines how digital intimacies among young people are represented and questioned in contemporary documentary and mockumentary cinema, while also considering how these films can be understood within the context of film pedagogy. The analysis explores how cinematic narratives can

function as educational tools that promote critical reflection on digital culture and encourage media literacy among viewers, students, and educators alike.

The study focuses on three films: *Imaginary Youth* (2024), *I Am Gen Z* (2021), and *The Price of Cheap Rent* (2022). It asks how these works visualize the emotional, psychological, and social effects of constant digital connection, how they depict surveillance by peers, institutions, and technologies, and how their approaches differ across cultural and cinematic contexts.

The selected films span distinct modes of storytelling: observational documentary, investigative documentary, and satirical mockumentary, offering a comparative perspective on form, tone, and the politics of representation. *Imaginary Youth*, a Romanian film by Ruxandra Gubernat, presents an intimate view of teenagers in post-communist Europe whose relationships with digital technology are shaped by economic precarity and limited mobility. *I Am Gen Z* adopts an analytical approach combining interviews with stylized visuals to investigate the effects of platform design on mental health and self-perception. *The Price of Cheap Rent* takes a more parodic route, using satire to critique influencer culture, performative relationships, and intimate partner surveillance.

The objective of this study is to analyze how contemporary documentary and mockumentary cinema visualizes digital intimacy and youth surveillance across different cultural and stylistic contexts. By comparing *Imaginary Youth*, *I Am Gen Z*, and *The Price of Cheap Rent*, the paper seeks to identify how each film translates the pressures of visibility and emotional connection into cinematic form. The central hypothesis is that these films do not merely depict digital life but actively function as pedagogical spaces, teaching viewers to reflect on the ethical, emotional, and social dimensions of being constantly connected.

By placing these films in dialogue, the paper contributes to scholarship on digital intimacies, youth media, and film pedagogy. It argues that cinema serves as a critical medium through which the contradictions of digital life are made visible and as a pedagogical space where audiences can reflect on the social and emotional challenges of being constantly connected.

Theoretical framework

Understanding digital intimacy in the context of youth culture requires an interdisciplinary approach engaging with media studies, cultural theory, and critical data studies. Digital intimacy refers to the affective, emotional, and social connections facilitated through digital technologies. As Susanna Paasonen (2018, p. 3) argues, digital intimacy is not inherently positive or negative. It is deeply ambivalent, characterized by pleasure, anxiety, connection, and disconnection.

Digital platforms blur the boundaries between public and private, exposing people's intimate lives to both desired audiences and unwanted forms of surveillance. Paasonen explains:

Digital intimacies are built through small, repetitive gestures – scrolling, liking, swiping, commenting – that fold affect into the architectures of media. These gestures blur the boundaries between work and play, care and exhaustion, as intimacy becomes part of the habitual rhythm of everyday life. What makes these connections meaningful is also what renders them fragile: they rely on infrastructures that are at once connective and extractive. (Paasonen, 2018, p. 15)

Shoshana Zuboff (2019, p. 8) has shown how surveillance capitalism reconfigures intimacy itself into a data commodity. Youth users, often considered “digital natives”, are particularly vulnerable to these forms of extraction and behavioral prediction, especially through social media platforms that reward performative self-disclosure. She observes that:

Every click, like, and pause is a signal, an expression of human experience that is seized without consent and transformed into behavioral data. These data are then claimed as private property, refined into prediction products, and sold in behavioral futures markets. The result is a new economic order that transforms our intimate lives into the raw material for profit. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 94)

Danah Boyd (2014, p. 55) further emphasizes how young people navigate visibility and privacy in networks of publics, often developing strategies to assert agency within systems designed to profit from their attention.

Intersectional perspectives are essential in this analysis, since digital intimacies are shaped by race, gender, class, and sexuality. Taina Bucher (2018, p. 16) highlights how opaque algorithmic logics disproportionately affect marginalized users, while Safiya Noble (2018, p. 1) and Ruha Benjamin (2019, p. 5) identify structural biases embedded in search engines and predictive technologies that shape how young people, especially Black, brown, and queer youth, are seen, tracked, surveilled, and represented online.

Affect theory also provides a valuable lens for understanding the emotional labor involved in sustaining digital relationships. Lauren Berlant's (2011, p. 1) concept of “cruel optimism” captures the tendency to maintain attachments, such as connectivity or digital affirmation, even when these diminish well-being.

This resonates with how young people often feel pressure to remain constantly online, to preserve social capital, or to curate idealized versions of themselves at heavy personal cost.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing how *Imaginary Youth* (2024), *I Am Gen Z* (2021), and *The Price of Cheap Rent* (2022) visualize the emotional, psychological, and political dimensions of digital intimacy. They also connect to the pedagogical dimension of this study by framing film as a space for critical learning. In the context of film pedagogy, these works can help viewers, educators, and students develop a more reflective and critical understanding of digital life, surveillance, and emotional selfhood. This pedagogical dimension positions film not only as a cultural artefact but also as a means of teaching critical awareness about how intimacy and visibility are shaped by digital technologies.

Case study: *Imaginary Youth* (Vis. Viață, 2024)

Ruxandra Gubernat's *Imaginary Youth* (Vis. Viață, translated as *Dream.Life*) unfolds as an observational portrait of three Romanian teenagers, Una, Habet, and Ștefania, who navigate the uncertain border between adolescence and adulthood. The film is shaped by stillness not by spectacle, it offers attention without overexplaining. Its atmosphere feels almost suspended, caught between post-socialist materiality and the soft glow of digital modernity.

Within the broader frame of this paper, Gubernat's film speaks to the theme of digital intimacy as a form of being both seen and exposed. Unlike *I Am Gen Z*, which visualizes data flows and platform manipulation, or *The Price of Cheap Rent*, which mocks performative surveillance, *Imaginary Youth* works through texture and duration. It shows how the pressure of visibility enters daily life not through algorithms but through emotion: gestures of hesitation, silence after a message, the echo of a dream voiced out loud.

Gubernat observes her subjects with patience. The camera does not intrude, it simply stays close enough to notice. Una rehearses acting monologues in English, her eyes fixed on a mirror that reflects both self-belief and doubt. Habet spends nights recording trap beats that merge local slang with global rhythm, a small act of self-assertion within a world that offers him few openings. Ștefania joins local environmental protests, her activism shaped by online networks that expand her sense of belonging while also exhausting it. Each of these trajectories reveals how digital mediation is emotional, not just technological. Connection is always entangled with fatigue, hope with fragility.

Imaginary Youth is so compelling because it understands clearly how visibility itself can be both gift and burden. The film's stillness conveys how digital culture

amplifies longing while narrowing what feels attainable. The teenagers' online worlds are rich with possibility, yet their physical surroundings tell a different story. A cracked wall behind Una as she rehearses, Habet's quiet after his recording cuts out, Ștefania's distracted gaze during a protest speech – details that speak to the friction between aspiration and limitation. Digital intimacy in this context is a fragile extension of the real.

The film's restraint becomes its language. By refusing to fill every silence, it captures the psychological tempo of contemporary adolescence: waiting, scrolling, imagining, doubting. The digital is not depicted as a screen or device, it becomes a condition of life, something ambient and inseparable from the way these young people think about themselves. Their gestures and vocabulary carry traces of globalized culture, yet their aspirations remain bounded by class, geography, and the slow economy of a country still in transition.

In an interview, Gubernat explained how the idea for the documentary grew from her frustration with how adults talk about young people without actually listening to them (Archip, 2025). "We keep saying that young people have no voice, but we never go and talk to them." This decision to listen rather than diagnose defines her approach. The gaze she offers is care, not surveillance, control but collaboration. By making space for her subjects to exist in a world that refuses to listen and without judgment, Gubernat challenges the logic of attention dominating both social media and much of documentary practice itself.

In the same interview, journalist Andreea Archip underlined the broader social tension that frames Gubernat's film:

We complain that young people have no voice, yet we rarely create spaces where they are truly heard. Films like *Imaginary Youth* do more than document adolescence, they invite adults to listen, to learn, and to question the hierarchies of speaking and hearing that define our culture. (Archip, 2024)

Viewed through the lens of this paper, *Imaginary Youth* complicates what it means to be seen in a world saturated by digital exposure. The teenagers' self-awareness before the camera mirrors their internalized awareness of the online gaze. They live with the sensation of being watched, yet what Gubernat reveals is not anxiety, it is closer to tenderness. Her camera creates a kind of counter-visibility, one that resists speed, performance, and quantification.

Nothing in *Imaginary Youth* resolves neatly. Una still wants to leave, Habet still records, Ștefania still organizes. The open ending feels intentional, as if the film itself refuses closure in the same way life does. To watch it is to recognize that intimacy in the digital age is not a fixed state but a process of negotiation. Her young subjects live between exposure and protection, ambition and exhaustion, hope and limitation. Through her slow, attentive method, Gubernat turns

observation into a gesture of solidarity, showing that to look carefully can still be an act of respect. From a pedagogical perspective, her approach models an ethics of attention that can be translated into educational practice, encouraging both students and educators to view observation itself as a form of learning and empathy. More broadly, the film demonstrates how documentary practice can serve as a site of informal education, where seeing, listening, and reflecting become collective exercises in understanding digital life.

If we apply this to pedagogical life, we can learn and teach our students who dedicate their interest to documentary film how to observe with kindness, without judgement and to create ethical environments for the characters they follow. Considering this as an option could contribute to making an already confusing and suffocating digital world more empathic and safe.

Case study: *I Am Gen Z* (2021)

Liz Smith's *I Am Gen Z* is a film that does not watch its subjects so much as it interrogates the environment watching them. Structured as a data-driven documentary, it examines how platform algorithms, neuro-design, and social-media systems shape attention, behavior, and emotional life. Yet, beneath its technological language, the film's power lies in how it visualizes the psychological cost of being constantly seen. Unlike Gubernat's quiet attentiveness in *Imaginary Youth*, Smith's film creates a sensory overload. The editing mimics the rhythm of a social media feed: fast, fragmented, restless. Every cut feels like a swipe, and that structure becomes its argument.

The film blends interviews with neuroscientists, designers, and young users who narrate their daily entanglement with digital devices. Smith does not let the viewer remain detached. The camera mimics the gaze of the machine, closing in on faces lit by blue light, tracking eyes as they flicker across screens. That closeness feels almost invasive, a reminder that the digital world is built on the forced extraction of attention. It emerges as more than a critique of social-media addiction, it is more a portrait of how data capitalism inhabits the young generations' nervous system.

In the context of this paper's framework, *I Am Gen Z* reveals the logic of surveillance from the inside out. The film visualizes how youth intimacy is reshaped by algorithmic prediction. Each gesture, liking, sharing, posting, becomes data, a trace folded into larger systems of tracking. The participants articulate a peculiar awareness: they know they are being monitored, yet they continue to perform. This tension between recognition and compliance forms the emotional spine of the film. Smith's framing makes that contradiction visible

through repetition. Shots of scrolling fingers, glowing notifications, and restless faces accumulate until the act of watching itself begins to feel exhausting.

The film's most striking achievement is its capacity to render the invisible visible. We see the architecture of the feed, the logic of endless recommendation, and the soft violence of being constantly compared to algorithmic ideals. The narration speaks in the language of design and neuroscience, without being moralizing, but the visual rhythm translates that theory into feeling. Viewers experience disorientation, overstimulation, and a low hum of anxiety. That sensory design mirrors the subjects' lived reality, creating an aesthetic of entrapment that belongs both to cinema and to the digital environment it critiques.

Where *Imaginary Youth* transforms the act of seeing into care and empathy, *I Am Gen Z* reveals how seeing becomes control. The film's teenagers describe moments when they sense their identities dissolving into the collective image of the platform. They are connected to millions yet isolated in their feeds. The film shows how social media is not a neutral tool, but an ecosystem that teaches people how to desire, compare, and self-surveil. What feels intimate becomes transactional. Likes, streaks, and messages become the metrics of belonging. What we have been told it would do, connect us to other people and offer us the world, comes at great personal expense and the act of belonging becomes a full-time job.

Smith's decision to juxtapose human confession with data visualization highlights the scale of the problem. A young woman explains how her self-worth shifts with every post, while graphs pulse across the screen showing dopamine spikes and engagement loops. That visual layering compresses the personal and the systemic into the same frame, blurring the line between emotional experience and technological infrastructure.

In one of the film's quieter moments, a teenager says that social media "feels like having your brain mirrored back to you, but slightly worse each time". That line captures the paradox of digital intimacy: the constant need to see oneself reflected, even when that reflection erodes confidence. *I Am Gen Z* does not offer solutions or nostalgia for a pre-digital past. Instead, it leaves the viewer with the uneasy awareness that the machinery of connection has already rewritten what intimacy means.

Within the argument of this paper, Smith's documentary embodies the aesthetics of exposure. It visualizes surveillance as a bodily condition, something internalized, normalized, and felt. If *Imaginary Youth* resists the gaze by slowing it down, *I Am Gen Z* overwhelms it, turning data into affect. Together, they map the spectrum of contemporary visibility: from tenderness to saturation, from being witnessed to being consumed.

Viewed through a pedagogical lens, the film demonstrates how media can teach critical awareness by transforming spectatorship into inquiry. Its sensory intensity invites viewers to recognize how attention is designed, manipulated, and transformed into a commodity. For educators, *I Am Gen Z* offers a valuable resource for developing discussions around media literacy, emotional regulation, and digital well-being. In a classroom or workshop setting, its structure of overload can function as both subject and method: students experience the pressures of digital life even as they analyze them.

This dual function aligns with the broader aims of film pedagogy, where viewing becomes a collaborative act of interpretation and reflection. By linking affect to analysis, the film encourages audiences to question their own participation in data economies and to reimagine what conscious, ethical engagement with technology might look like. Ultimately, Smith's work shows that the study of film can also be a study of perception itself, training viewers to see the hidden architectures that shape their digital identities and emotional worlds (Smith, 2021).

Case study: *The Price of Cheap Rent* (2022)

The Price of Cheap Rent, directed by Alice Seabright and produced by BBC Studios Productions, takes the language of the mockumentary and folds it back on itself. What begins as satire slowly exposes something far less humorous: the exhaustion of living inside an economy where visibility itself has become a form of rent. The film's characters, young influencers sharing an apartment, broadcast their daily lives as branded content. Every gesture, argument, or confession doubles as material for an audience they cannot quite see and that cannot quite understand them, but judges them, nonetheless.

The story works like a distorted mirror of digital intimacy. Seabright builds her world around exaggerated self-surveillance, where domestic life becomes a set and personal boundaries blur into strategy. The handheld camera, styled to mimic vlogs and reality television, creates a feeling of constant awareness. The characters joke about the audience, but the laughter carries an edge. Their jokes are survival tactics, a way to manage the discomfort of being permanently watched.

Within the framework of this study, *The Price of Cheap Rent* represents the far end of the spectrum of digital self-exposure. Where *Imaginary Youth* observes young people through empathy and *I Am Gen Z* exposes algorithmic anxiety, Seabright's film takes those pressures and twists them into absurd performance. It exaggerates the rituals of content creation until they feel unbearable. In doing so, it makes visible what most social media narratives conceal: the quiet labor behind the appearance of authenticity.

The mockumentary form intensifies this critique. The audience knows the scenario is fictional, but the characters play their roles with the sincerity of

actual influencers. That uncertainty between what is performed and what is real becomes part of the argument. Surveillance here is not imposed from outside, but invited in. Each roommate participates in their own exposure, negotiating intimacy through metrics and reactions. The tension builds until the house itself feels like a living algorithm, measuring their worth in views and sponsorships.

Seabright balances humor with discomfort. The film is funny, but its humor cuts close to real emotion. When one of the tenants admits that she cannot sleep without checking notifications, the moment lands somewhere between comedy and confession. The camera does not mock her, it holds her in the same frame that has trapped her. This is where the mockumentary achieves its most unsettling effect: it lets the viewer feel implicated, caught in the same loop of curiosity and consumption.

At its core, *The Price of Cheap Rent* turns the architecture of surveillance into domestic space. The apartment becomes a miniature internet: crowded, visible, profitable, and emotionally thin. Every corner hides a camera, every private moment risks exposure. Yet within that pressure, small flashes of sincerity appear: awkward silences, failed jokes, a half-finished meal. These fragments remind us that even in performance, traces of real intimacy persist.

In an interview, Seabright remarked that she wanted to explore “how friendship and visibility can become inseparable when the economy rewards confession” (Seabright, 2022). That idea defines the emotional terrain of the film. The characters’ relationships collapse under the weight of exposure because intimacy itself has been repackaged as currency. What remains is not connection, it is performance fatigue.

Within this paper’s broader argument, *The Price of Cheap Rent* exposes the final stage of digital surveillance culture: when being watched is not simply endured but monetized. The film’s satire is effective precisely because it feels recognizably close to real life. Every viewer knows this world, even if they pretend to laugh at it from a distance.

From a pedagogical perspective, Seabright’s mockumentary provides a powerful tool for teaching critical media awareness. Its exaggerated form opens space for discussion about performance, authenticity, and the economics of visibility. In educational contexts, the film can be used to analyze how humor and irony provoke reflection on digital behavior. Students can learn to recognize their own participation in economics of exposure and to think critically about how identity is shaped by visibility. Even more, *The Price of Cheap Rent* demonstrates how film can operate as a site of collective learning, where satire becomes both critique and pedagogy, a way of understanding the social scripts that govern attention, desire, and belonging in digital culture.

Comparative discussion

When placed in dialogue, *Imaginary Youth*, *I Am Gen Z*, and *The Price of Cheap Rent* reveal the multilayered nature of digital intimacies, particularly how they are shaped by social position, platform structures, and cultural narratives. Each film employs a different cinematic mode, observational, analytical, and satirical, to expose a different facet of how young people experience connection, visibility, and surveillance in the digital age.

A key point of contrast lies in how these films represent the relationship between emotional life and digital infrastructure. *Imaginary Youth* emphasizes the ambient presence of digital culture, showing how it subtly informs aspiration and emotional expression, particularly within conditions of economic marginality. In contrast, *I Am Gen Z* brings the algorithm to the foreground, explicitly naming the neurological and social consequences of digital saturation. Meanwhile, *The Price of Cheap Rent* uses parody to expose how these same infrastructures commodify emotional experience for public consumption, portraying digital intimacy as both strategic and exhausting.

The films also differ in how they frame surveillance. In *Imaginary Youth*, surveillance is quiet and internalized, embedded in feelings of constraint and precarity. In *I Am Gen Z*, it is externalized, systemic, and often gendered and racialized, exposing users to algorithmic discrimination. *The Price of Cheap Rent*, on the other hand, renders surveillance as both performative and intimate, an active part of relationships and self-branding. This diversity of perspective reflects the varied ways young people understand and respond to being watched and analyzed, by algorithms, peers, institutions, and themselves.

The intersection of identity, culture, and social structure is most clearly articulated through the comparison between *I Am Gen Z* and *Imaginary Youth*. While the former addresses identity categories explicitly, accentuating racialized and gendered experiences, the latter embeds these experiences in broader narratives of mobility, class, and national belonging. *The Price of Cheap Rent* connects these threads by highlighting how influencer culture often exploits marginalized narratives for aesthetic or commercial gain, without addressing the inequalities they reflect.

Ultimately, these films make visible the affective work involved in being young and connected: the work of curating, performing, protecting, and surviving one's digital self. Whether through stillness, testimony, or satire, they collectively argue that digital intimacy is not just about closeness but about control, compromise, and survival in an era of constant connection.

These films show how digital life has become inseparable from emotional life. Across their different styles, they reveal how being young today often means

balancing the need to be visible with the desire to stay authentic, to connect while protecting oneself from overexposure and to seem unique, while blending in. Each story opens a different angle on that tension, how technology shapes feeling, how performance becomes survival, and how visibility is both empowering and exhausting. The worlds they depict may differ in tone and scale, but they share a sense that intimacy is never free. It always costs attention, energy, or a piece of privacy, and that cost defines what it means to grow up connected.

From a pedagogical perspective, the comparative view of these films offers valuable ground for media education. Together, they provide a framework for teaching critical reflection on digital culture, showing how aesthetic form can translate abstract concepts such as surveillance, affect, and authenticity into emotional understanding. In classroom or workshop settings, these works can be used to explore how film analysis becomes a form of self-analysis, inviting students to consider their own habits of visibility and connection. In this sense, the study of these films models the practice of film pedagogy itself: a process of learning through attention, empathy, and critical observation, where watching becomes a way of understanding the conditions of digital life.

Moreover, these films illustrate how cinematic texts can act as educational laboratories, where the act of viewing becomes an ethical encounter with the self and others. Through guided discussion, collective viewing, and reflective writing, students can approach these films as dynamic texts that open pathways for rethinking intimacy, identity, and agency. Thus, the pedagogical potential of cinema extends beyond analysis, becoming a practice of care, awareness, and shared understanding within the study of contemporary digital culture.

Conclusion

As digital platforms continue to shape everyday experience, the lives of young people offer essential insight into how intimacy, identity, connection and visibility are being redefined. The three films discussed here show that cinema remains a privileged space for thinking about these transformations, not only through representation but through the ways it teaches us to look, to listen, and to interpret. Their different approaches reveal how digital connection is never neutral: it is social, emotional, and pedagogical all at once.

Film, in this sense, becomes a form of learning. *Imaginary Youth*, *I Am Gen Z*, and *The Price of Cheap Rent* do not simply describe the conditions of life online, they allow viewers to experience and analyze those conditions as processes of education. Each film produces a kind of lesson in attention. *Imaginary Youth* teaches patience and empathy, showing how observation can itself be an ethical act. *I Am*

Gen Z turns analysis into emotion, inviting viewers to feel the weight of algorithmic control. *The Price of Cheap Rent* uses humor and exaggeration to expose the social scripts of performance and self-exposure that structure digital life. Together they transform spectatorship into reflection, turning the act of viewing into a rehearsal for critical awareness.

In the context of film and theatre pedagogy, these works can enrich classroom practice by linking aesthetic form with social understanding. Bringing them into discussion allows students to move beyond abstract debates about technology and instead confront the textures of their own digital experiences. Through collective viewing and dialogue, learners can explore how visibility, surveillance, and emotion operate not only on screen but in their personal and cultural environments. Such encounters help cultivate sensitivity to image, language, and power, encouraging students to connect theoretical ideas with lived realities.

Pedagogically, these films also remind educators of the value of slowness and attention. The sustained act of watching is an alternative to the constant movement of digital life. It creates time for interpretation, disagreement, and discovery. By analyzing these works, students learn that interpretation is not about reaching closure but about sustaining curiosity. This practice of careful observation becomes a form of care itself, a way of engaging with the world that resists the speed and distraction often dominating online spaces.

Teaching through film can therefore become a practice of empathy and critical literacy. While students interpret the gestures, silences, and rhythms of these films, they are also learning to read their own social environments. The classroom becomes a site where media literacy extends beyond technical competence to include emotional and ethical understanding. Discussion of *Imaginary Youth* might lead to conversations about inequality and aspiration, reflection on *I Am Gen Z* could open questions about mental health and digital design, while exploring *The Price of Cheap Rent* might prompt debate about performance, exploitation, and the economics of attention. Each film offers a way to connect analysis to self-knowledge.

This pedagogical approach situates film as both object and method. It recognizes that cinema can be a means of thinking with others, of turning private experience into shared inquiry. Watching together allows students to test their interpretations, to listen to alternative readings, and to practice a mode of collective reflection that contrasts with the isolation of algorithmic culture. They could also learn patience, to listen to different opinions and not to judge. The process of viewing becomes collaborative rather than consumptive, a way of building understanding through conversation, not reaction.

These films remind us that digital intimacy is a challenge for education itself. To study it is to ask how we might teach and learn in ways that preserve

vulnerability, curiosity, and care in environments that so often reward exposure and certainty. Film and theatre pedagogy offers one such possibility. By drawing attention to emotion, embodiment, and relation, it gives students tools to understand their own participation in the systems that shape visibility and desire.

To learn through these films is to practice a kind of ethical seeing. It means recognizing that connection is always relational, that every act of looking carries responsibility, and that education can begin in the moment we choose to look with patience, not possession. The study of digital intimacy becomes a study of how to inhabit the world attentively. This way, cinema continues to teach what technology alone cannot: how to perceive with depth, how to think with feeling, and how to imagine more humane ways of being connected.

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Filmography:

1. *Imaginary Youth (Vis.Viață)* (2024). Directed by Ruxandra Gubernat [Film]. Hi Film Productions (Bucharest).
2. *The Price of Cheap Rent* (2022). Directed by Alice Seabright [Film]. BBC Studios Productions (London).
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