

'Reel' Reality Is Essence of Cinema Therapy

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My connection with cinema therapy began during a seminar I attended about using metaphors from movies in the therapeutic process. I learned there of a study purportedly showing that more people experience relief from symptoms of trauma by watching films than through psychotherapy.

In my research I came to understand more about the impact of movies on the psyche and how to use films to support my work with individual clients, couples, as well as in a cinema therapy group. In talking to colleagues I learned that the practice of using clients' responses to movies has spread, and now, more and more therapists recognize the value of cinema therapy as a therapeutic modality or as an adjunct to traditional therapeutic methods.

Why Cinema Therapy Works

Watching a movie with conscious awareness can be similar to experiencing a guided visualization. The therapeutic effect and the theoretical basis for both approaches are therefore closely related. Films can be used in combination with multiple theoretical psychotherapeutic orientations, including, psychodynamic therapy, cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), behavior modification treatment, and systems-oriented therapies.

Films contain metaphors that can be utilized in therapy similar to stories, myths, jokes, fables, or even dreams. In CBT, films can fulfill the role of a supportive device for understanding maladaptive core beliefs and for cognitive restructuring. Cognitive insights through the movie-watching experience tell clients what to do, while affective insights give them the motivation to follow through.

Viewing films in which a character demonstrates courage in the face of a challenge can support behavior modification treatment. The client becomes motivated to copy the behavior seen on screen and is more open to successfully undergo treatments such as "exposure with behavior avoidance prevention."

Systems-oriented therapists can find support for their approach by choosing movies that convey communication patterns as well as unfamiliar concepts of family systems and their dynamics.

One way to explain the powerful learning effect of cinema therapy is through recent theories of learning and creativity, which suggest that we have several types of

“intelligences.” Watching movies can engage all seven types: the logical (plot), the linguistic (dialogue), the visual-spatial (pictures, colors, symbols), the musical (sounds and music), the interpersonal (storytelling), the kinesthetic (moving), and the intrapsychic (inner guidance). The more of these intelligences we access, the faster we learn because they employ different methods of information processing. In addition, films galvanize feelings, which increase the probability that clients will carry out new and desired behaviors.

Identifying with a character can help clients to develop ego strength as they recall forgotten inner resources and become aware of the right opportunity for those resources to be applied.

Understanding reactions to characters who are “different” and unlikable can guide the client to discover in the “shadow” of their own psyche and story their true self and their potential. Watching movies at home in this context serves as a bridge between therapy and life.

Clinical Examples

Following are two examples from my own practice.

“Sally” (not her real name) arrived at our session confused and worried. The night before she had become angry with her boyfriend. Now, she said, she felt bad because she saw that the small mistake he had made didn’t justify her anger. The real reason for her reaction was that she felt excluded and abandoned that he was leaving the next morning on an extended fishing trip with his buddies.

As we explored this, Sally came to understand that her anger was a way for her to push him away by defending against her vulnerability and fear of abandonment. She sensed it would help her to tell him about these feelings when he returned, but she was too “afraid to look stupid,” she told me.

“He might take advantage of my vulnerability, criticize me, see me as needy, and push me away. Then I would feel even worse,” she said.

In the process of working with this, Sally began to understand that these beliefs might be based on projections. But a significant shift in that understanding didn’t happen until she viewed a movie I suggested: “Sliding Doors” (1998).

I asked her to focus specifically on the combination of strength and vulnerability that the main character, Helen, displays when she runs into her ex-boyfriend, James, on the street and expresses her renewed interest in him even though she is not sure whether he is still interested in her. James responds with emotional openness, and they develop a close

relationship from this point on.

At her next session, Sally remarked that, “Helen looked like she put herself out on a limb. She looked not weak at all. In fact, she seemed kind of courageous and strong allowing herself to be so open and emotionally vulnerable.”

Sally was able to internalize Helen’s courage: “What Helen can do, I could do, too.” First my client was able to understand more clearly how she had been projecting. Then she saw the opportunity to experience more emotional closeness with her boyfriend by allowing herself to be vulnerable with him.

We discussed that at times of emotional stress she usually is not in touch with her strength and courage. Through watching and discussing this movie scene, it sank in consciously for Sally that she already carried these qualities inside her. I believe that without the aid of the movie, Sally would have found it much harder to recognize this capacity in herself.

Another client of mine, “Alice,” had worked with her grief over the pending end of her marriage for a while. When it became clear to her that her marriage was over, she cried a lot in session and felt some relief. “I believe that something good will come out of this, but I can’t be sure,” she said.

I told her that many movies have been made that begin in despair and end in triumph. If she could identify with characters trapped in their circumstances, and share their disappointments as well as their unsteady steps toward liberation, she could start finding reason for optimism in her own situation. This could help her gain the courage to do what is necessary to change her situation.

I encouraged Alice to let a film inspire her to learn how to survive her loss without succumbing to it, possibly coming out of it transformed. I suggested several movies and asked Alice to choose a film that had touched her when she seen it before. The plot need not match her situation exactly as long as a character was going through this kind of transformation. Alice chose “The Four Seasons” (1981).

Throughout her next sessions, we addressed the following themes, going back and forth between her process and a scene or a character in the movie that had inspired her: acceptance and compassion with herself and her grief, small acts of courage despite fear (such as reaching out to friends and joining a divorce support group), determination, endurance, and transformation. After her separation, Alice began to enjoy her new freedom. She discovered new strength and compassion. She got in touch with a new sense of autonomy and purpose.

The Big Movie of Your Life

If you find the guidelines for watching movies with conscious awareness useful (see sidebar on page 10), consider using them not only in “reel life.” Adapt them to “real life” since they can help you become a better observer.

Because observing your responses while watching a film helps you to “step back,” you will find that the better you become at reflecting about yourself, the more obvious “the bigger picture” will become. In this way, watching movies helps you learn to understand yourself and others more deeply in the “big movie” of your life. You develop a skill to see yourself and the world more objectively, and less through projections—an artificially rigid, judgmental, or emotional filter.

Birgit Wolz, PhD, is a therapist specializing in using cinema therapy as an adjunct to traditional therapeutic methods and teaching this approach to graduate students as well as therapists. She writes cinema therapy movie reviews for The Therapist, the magazine of The California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Her book E-Motion Picture Magic as well as her CE on-line course at www.drzur.com/cinematherapycourse guide the reader through the basic principles of cinema therapy. For more information, visit cinematherapy.com.

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SIDEBAR 1

Guidelines for Watching Movies With Conscious Awareness

I give my clients and group members who want to use movies for healing and growth the following guidelines. I encourage them to adapt the techniques to suit their own personal style as they progress.

Sit comfortably and let your attention move effortlessly, without strain, first to your body and then to your breathing, inhaling and exhaling naturally. Notice and release any tension or holding.

Your gentle attention is sufficient to help you become more present and balanced, as it spontaneously deepens and corrects your breathing if it is constricted. Experience your condition without inner criticizing or comment.

As soon as you are calm and centered, start watching the movie. Most deeper insights arrive when you pay attention to the story and to yourself. Observe how the movie images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect your breath. Don't analyze anything while you are watching—be fully present with your experience.

Afterwards reflect on the following questions. It helps to write down your answers.

Do you remember whether your breathing changed throughout the movie? Could this be an indication that something threw you off balance? In all likelihood, what affects you in the film is similar to whatever unbalances you in your daily life. Ask yourself: If a part of the film that moved you (positively or negatively) had been one of your dreams, how would you have understood the symbolism in it? Notice what you liked and didn't like or even hated about the movie. Which characters or actions seemed especially attractive or unattractive to you? Did you identify with one or several characters? Were there one or several characters in the movie that modeled behavior you would like to emulate? Did they develop certain strengths or other capacities that you would like to develop? Notice whether any aspect of the film was especially hard to watch. Could this be related to something that you might have repressed ("shadow")? Uncovering repressed aspects of our psyche can free up positive qualities and uncover our more positive qualities of our whole and authentic self. Did you experience something that connected you to your inner wisdom or higher self as you watched the film?

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