

Cinema Therapy:

Using the Power of Imagery in Films for the Therapeutic Process

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Roots of Cinema Therapy

Therapeutic Effect of the Movie Experience

Recent Theories of Learning and Creativity

The Power of Metaphors and Symbols

The Power of Myths and Stories

The Mythic Structure of Movies

Modern Rules of Screenplay

Movies, Myths and Transformation

The Power of Projection

Stages of Cognitive and Emotional Interpretation through

Identification and Projection

Stages of Cognitive and Emotional Interpretation through

Projection of Disowned Parts of Self

Three Ways of Cinema Therapy

The Evocative Way

The Prescriptive Way

The Cathartic Way

Watching Movies with Conscious Awareness

Doubting Voices

Therapeutic Environments

Ways Films Aid the Therapeutic Process

Supporting process of diagnosis and assessment

Helping to overcome resistance

Encouraging Insight, Self-reflection and –understanding

Eliciting Emotions

Identifying and Reinforcing Inner Strength

Reinforcing an Idea Introduced in Therapy

Film Experience with Individual Clients in Different Therapeutic Approaches

Depth Psychotherapy and the Movie Experience

Viewing Films as Doorways to the Unconscious

Therapeutic Reasoning for Working with the Unconscious

Cognitive Therapy and the Movie Experience

Marty Lefkoe's Decision Maker Process

Behavior Modification Therapy and the Movie Experience

Hypnotherapy and the Movie Experience

Parts work and the Movie Experience

EMDR and the Movie Experience

Narrative Therapy and the Movie Experience

Couples and Family Therapy and the Movie Experience

Cinema Therapy Groups

Self-discovery, Healing and Growth through Work with Matrices

The Film Matrix

The Self Matrix

The Growth Matrix

Guidelines and Limitation

Movie Examples for Cinema Therapy work

Possible Applications of Work with certain Movies

Guidelines for Work with Prescribed Films – Preparation

Guidelines for Work with Films in the Prescriptive or the Evocative Way

Guidelines for Cinema Therapy Groups

Limitations Cinema Therapy

References

Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself ...

... why does a certain film have more impact on us in a specific phase of our lives than in others?

... why do some scenes stick in our memory?

... why do certain movies, characters, or scenes in motion pictures move us more deeply than others?

... what can we learn about ourselves from our responses to films?

These questions will come up for our clients when we use movies as an adjunct to traditional methods in therapy. In the following course we will explore them and demonstrate the ways in which the movie experience can become a catalyst for the therapeutic process.

The Filmmaker, Ingmar Bergman, said: *"No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul."* (Bergman, 1988, p. 8)

Movies affect us powerfully because the synergistic impact of music, dialogue, lighting, camera angles, and sound effects enables a film to bypass ordinary defensive censors in us. "Hollywood took the original invention of the cinematic camera and invented a new art form in which the viewer becomes enveloped in the work of art. The camera carries the spectator into each scene, and the viewer perceives events from the inside as if surrounded by the characters in the film". (Wedding, Boyd & Niemiec, 2005, p. 1). Movies draw us into the viewing experience, but at the same time - often more easily than in real life - afford a unique opportunity to retain a perspective outside the experience, the observer's view.

As one measure of just how powerful movies have become, consider how some sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and clerics complain that movies are changing the way society, especially children, view themselves and their world (Mistry, 2000). Such critics point out that in an effort to appeal to the basest elements of human nature, many movies overemphasize graphic violence and sex.

Of course, their complaint is about the films' *content* — not the medium. But it is interesting to note that while such critics level these same complaints against other media — books, magazines, popular music, fine art — movies bear the lion's share of such attacks. It is illuminating to ask why. I believe it is because movies, by virtue of their verisimilitude and ubiquity, have significantly greater power than other media to move us, to change the way we see our world and ourselves.

The classic Bandura experiment with Bobo doll showed how imitation on a screen is powerful in changing behavior. 88% of the children, who watched a

video where a model would aggressively hit a doll, subsequently imitated the aggressive behavior. Eight months later, 40% of the same children reproduced the violent behavior observed in this experiment. (Bandura, 1973, p. 72)

Many films play to the lowest common denominators — the base human instincts and desires. Even so, it is practically impossible to number the movies that seek the opposite pole, that strive to inspire the highest human values. The vast majority of movies simply hope to entertain by spinning a good yarn, and even those sometimes end up unintentionally serving as a catalyst for personal insight into the darker side of the soul. When those dark aspects are brought into the light of conscious awareness, true inner freedom is possible. Like no other medium before it, the popular movie presents the potential of a new power for illuminating the depth of human experience.

Even though the movies are outside of ourselves, as we respond to them emotionally, we can see how they reflect our inner world. Through the imagery of films we can discover ourselves because the unconscious communicates its content to our conscious mind mostly in symbolic images. I have made use of this “communication” in my psychotherapy practice for many years by utilizing imagery tools. I have used active imagination and dream work, as well as techniques like Interactive Guided Imagery and hypnotherapy, often with amazing results. Now I include the movie experience, which puts clients in a light trance and therefore affects them like a guided meditation.

Both fiction and nonfiction films can be used in therapeutic work with movies. But I have chosen to focus solely on the use of fictional films. I do so for two reasons: they constitute the vast majority of movies most easily accessed (even if some of those fictional stories are based on true-life stories); and though documentary and other nonfiction formats are often used with strong effect and result in films that are truly powerful agents for personal reflection, many fictional stories also contain an added mythic dimension, which is important to the transformational process (Campbell, 1988) and is often missing in nonfiction films.

Roots of Cinema Therapy

As with most “new” ideas, many aspects of cinema therapy are not really new. The use of movies for personal growth and healing carries forward a long-standing connection between storytelling and self-reflection that in all probability dates back to the beginnings of spoken language. Many cultures throughout human history have recognized the transformative and healing effect of the act of telling and listening to stories. Cinema therapy can be traced back to bibliotherapy, which is the use of *engaged reading* in order to gain insight into one’s psyche. (Mellon, 2003). The practice of bibliotherapy may go back as far as the ancient Greeks where the door to the library at Thebes bore the inscription: “The Healing Place of the Soul.” (Riordan and Wilson, 1989)

Stemming from the invention of the printing press (1450) and the invention of the novel (mid-1700s), the rise of popular literature made it increasingly easier for individuals to “hear” well-crafted stories more frequently. (Lenkowsky, 1987)

Beginning with the spread of psychoanalysis during the first half of the twentieth century, analysts began prescribing specific reading material, often novels, for some of their patients. In 1916 the term bibliotherapy made its first appearance in psychological literature. (Shrank & Engels, 1981) During the explosion of the self-help movement in the 1960s through the 1980s, the main focus shifted away from the use of fictional books to nonfiction self-help manuals. Even so, in 1983, James Hillman emphasized the practice of using fiction in therapy in his book, *Healing Fiction* (Hillman, 1983).

The Greeks used drama in their visual and performance arts as a catharsis to deal with their emotions. Up to this day the Greeks don’t sit passively in their seats as we do, and clap politely at the end. In both ancient and modern Greek theaters, people yell, scream, cry, and become quite expressive. The ancient Greeks had developed poetic ways to heal the emotional wounds caused by war. Tragedy had been performed for catharsis to cleanse disordered emotions and heal trauma. Aristotle theorized “tragic plays have the capacity to purify the spirit and aid us in coping with aspects of life that cannot be reconciled by rational thought”. (Murnaghan, 1951)

Cinema Therapy was mentioned in psychological articles as early as 1990, and in 1993 Marsha Sinetar published the first book that specifically discussed the use of movies as a tool for personal growth: *Reel Power — Spiritual Growth Through Film* (Sinetar, 1993).

How the Therapeutic Effect of the Movie Experience Can Be Explained

Recent Theories of Learning and Creativity

Research about accelerated learning indicates that acquisition and retention are enhanced when, in addition to the use of stories and metaphors, multiple senses are engaged during the learning process.

Howard Gardner suggests that we have multiple “intelligences.” (Gardner, 1993) The more of these intelligences we access, the faster we learn, because by doing so we employ different methods of information processing. In *The Laugh & Cry Movie Guide* Cathie Glenn Sturdevant hypothesizes that watching movies can engage most of these intelligences Sturdevant, (1998):

- The film’s plot engages our *logical intelligence*
- Script dialogue engages the *linguistic intelligence*
- Pictures, colors, and symbols on the screen engage the *visual-spatial intelligence*
- Sounds and music engage our *musical intelligence*
- Storytelling engages the *interpersonal intelligence*
- Movement engages the *kinesthetic intelligence*
- Self-reflection or inner guidance, as demonstrated especially in inspirational films, engages the *intrapyschic intelligence*.

The viewer accesses the last three intelligences not directly but through identification with the characters.

The above demonstrates how movies can speak to a client on a variety of psychological and physiological channels; and the effect is synergistic, all of which further elevates cinema’s potential for healing and transformation. Film characters often model strength, courage, and other positive qualities, helping a client through life’s difficult times.

The Power of Metaphors and Symbols

Many films, like dreams, are full of metaphors and symbols. Metaphors and symbols can affect us on a deep level. (Gordon, 1978) Carl G. Jung said: “As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.” (Jung, 1964, p. 35)

This concept has similarities to the theories of learning and creativity, though both are coming from a very different theoretical background.

Metaphors and symbols, in therapeutic context, are especially useful:

- To stimulate bi-lateral thinking and creativity, since both parts of the brain get engaged
- To carry multiple levels of information
- To pass suggestions to the subconscious mind, since metaphors and symbols can create a bridge to the subconscious.
- To bypass normal ego defenses with therapeutic messages
- To facilitate retrieval of resource experiences

The Power of Myths and Stories

“ ... moviemaking can be considered the contemporary form of mythmaking, reflecting our response to ourselves and the mysteries and wonders of our existence”(Voytilla, 1999, p. 1)

Carl Gustav Jung placed the psyche within the evolutionary process. According to his theory, we inherit as part of our humanity, a collective unconscious, the part of our mind that is prefigured by evolution, just as is the body. Jung also said that mythic stories make up a collective “dream.” The whole of mythology can be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious. (Jung, 1927)
Movies are a significant part of our evolving mythology. The individual is linked to the past of the whole species and the long stretch of evolution of the organism.

The patterns of myth are used in many fairy tales, novels, theater plays, and screenplays for movies. Therefore our responses to certain movies demonstrate recognition of these deep layers of our unconscious. Films, like myths, tap into patterns of the collective unconscious. Their stories have such a powerful effect on us because they speak directly to the heart and spirit, avoiding the resistance of the conscious mind. In doing so they help us in our personal process of healing and transformation.

The *Star Wars* (1977 – 2005) movies reflect this connection to the unconscious. This might be the reason why they are the most successful film series in history.

Milton Erickson used *Teaching Tales* in formal trance states, as well as in open-eye-trance when he just told the story without formal induction. (Rosen, 1982)
Listening to a story in a focused way creates a form of trance state. He called these tales a form of “indirect suggestion”, in which “subliminal commands” are conveyed, and used this method to circumvent resistance to hypnotic (or any other kind of suggestion) through “unconscious learning”. (Hudson & Martin, 1992)
An unconscious learning is a state wherein patients intuitively understand the meaning of dreams and symbols and other unconscious expressions. Clients enter a state, while listening, in which they are less involved with thoughts and issues. They accept suggestions with a reduced critical sense. Erickson also emphasized that people resist commands, but they don't resist descriptions. He constructed metaphoric tales with a series of embedded commands. (Erickson & Rossi, 1980)

Being “drawn into” a movie while watching can be considered a trance state too.

The Mythic Structure of Movies

Christopher Vogler points out in *The Writer's Journey* that the ideas embedded in mythology and identified by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1973) can be applied to understanding almost any human problem. The stages of the Hero's Journey can be traced in all kinds of stories, not just those that feature heroic physical action and adventure, but also in romance, comedy, and thrillers, etc. "The protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey, even if the path leads only in his own mind or into the realm of relationships." (Volger, 1998, p. 13)

Dorothy's voyage in *The Wizard of Oz* shows how film characters' stories are often similar to the Hero's Journey. On her quest she goes through phases of hesitation, fear, meeting mentors, becoming aware that she cannot go back, facing tests, obstacles, and crises, confronting fear, gaining new perspective, and undergoing inner change. For example, she brings back a new idea of home, a new concept of "Self."

The stages of the Hero's Journey can be described as follows (Volger, 1998, pp. 81-235):

1. The Ordinary World - audience meets the hero, discovers ambitions and limitations and forms a bond of identification and recognition

Most stories take the hero out of the ordinary comfortable, mundane world and into a Special World, new and challenging. ... It may be an outward journey to an actual place, a strange city or a country, or a new location that becomes an arena for conflict with an antagonist or an inner conflict.

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, Dorothy's "ordinary world" is shown as her normal life in Kansas before she is blown to the wonder world of Oz.

2. The Call to Adventure - hero challenged to solve some problem

Once presented with the call to adventure, the hero can no longer remain in the comfort of the ordinary world.

Miss Gulch arrives and spitefully takes Dorothy's dog Toto away. A conflict is set up between two sides struggling for control of Dorothy's soul. But the instinctive Toto escapes. Dorothy follows her instincts, which are issuing her Call to Adventure, and runs away from home.

3. Refusal to the Call - hero hesitates or expresses fear

The hero is not yet fully committed to the journey and may still be thinking of turning back.

Dorothy runs away from home and later turns back for the time being. Her loved ones are out of reach. She is alone with Toto, symbolizing her intuition. She understands that she can never go back to the way things were.

4. Meeting with the Mentor - hero contacts source of reassurance, experience or wisdom

The relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the most common themes in mythology, and one of the richest in symbolic value. It stands for the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, god and man.

Glinda the Good Witch gives Dorothy guidance and the ruby slippers that will eventually get her home again.

5. Crossing the Threshold - hero commits to adventure, enters Special World

The hero finally commits to the adventure and enters the Special World.

This is the moment when Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road.

6. Tests, Allies and Enemies - situations and people help hero discover what's special about the Special World

At this stage on the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy acquires her companions, the Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman and Cowardly Lion, and makes enemies such as an orchard full of grumpy trees. She passes a number of tests such as getting Scarecrow off the nail, oiling the Tin Woodsman, and helping the Cowardly Lion deal with Fear.

7. The Approach to the Inmost Cave – hero prepares for central battle of confrontation with failure, defeat, or death

This is the most dangerous place in the Special World. Modern heroes might enter into it by venturing into space, into the depth of a modern city, or into their own hearts.

Dorothy is kidnapped to the Wicked Witch's baleful castle, and her companions are slipping in to save her.

8. The Ordeal - the central crisis in which the hero faces greatest fears or tastes death

The audience is held in suspense and tension, sometimes not knowing whether the hero will live or die. Identified with the hero, we, as the audience, experience aliveness looking death in the face, and become even more alive

by the hero's return from death. In romantic comedies, the death faced by the hero may simply be the temporary death of the relationship.

The Wicked Witch traps Dorothy and her friends, and it looks like there is no way out.

9. The Reward - hero is reborn and enjoys benefits of having confronted fear

Having survived death or fear, the hero now takes possession of the treasure he has searched for.

Dorothy escapes from the Wicked Witch's castle with the Witch's burnt broomstick. With help of Toto's animal intuition, they discover a meek little old man behind a curtain controlling the monstrous illusion of Oz, the great and powerful. Metaphorically speaking, the hero sees, through the eyes of the intuitive curious Toto that behind the illusion of the mightiest organization is a human being with emotions that can be reached. The Reward is the achievement of inner change, heart, brain and courage for Dorothy's friends.

10. The Road back - hero commits to finishing adventure and leaves Special World

The hero is not out of the woods yet, because now he has to deal with the consequences of confronting the dark forces of the Ordeal. Some movies have chase scenes at this point – for example, the moonlight bicycle flight of Elliot and E.T. in the movie *E.T.*

The Wizard is not able to help Dorothy get back home to Kansas because his balloon wobbles off. Like many heroes, having used familiar means, Dorothy is in danger to be stuck in the Special World. Guided by her instincts (the dog) she knows deep down how to find the proper branching of the path to get home.

11. The Resurrection - a climactic test that purifies, redeems and transforms the hero on threshold of home

It's a kind of final exam for the hero, who must be tested once more to see if he has really learned the lessons of the Ordeal.

The Resurrection for Dorothy is recovering from the apparent death of her hopes when the Wizard accidentally floated off in the balloon. At this point the Good Witch, representing the positive anima (in Jungian terms) that connects us to home and family, tells Dorothy that she has had the power to return home all along.

12. Return with the Elixir - hero comes home and shares what has been gained on the quest, which benefits others

The Elixir, treasure or lesson from the Special World is a magic potion with the power to heal. E.T. returns home with the experience of friendship with humans.

Dorothy returns to Kansas with the knowledge that she is loved, and "There's no place like home." She recognizes the people around her as characters from Oz. But her perception has changed as a result of her experience in the Special World. The Elixir she brings back is this new idea of home, a new concept of Self.

Modern Rules of Screenplay

Sturdevant describes the typical plot development according to modern rules of screenplay writing. (Sturdevant, 1998, pp. 33-44) The main character commits to a quest after a surprising loss of innocence, goes through a phase of inner conflict about taking on a challenge, and reaches a point of no return. Then the film hero acts despite fear, releases old ideas, renews his or her commitment, acts without fear, sometimes revises plans into realistic goals, and concludes the original quest by resolving it from a new perspective.

These similarities justify the assumption that the patterns of many movie plots are born out of the aspect of the collective unconscious that is reflected in our mythology. The viewer is hooked into the same pool of consciousness as the screenwriter. Both tap into the following wisdom: The antidote for the ache lies in ceasing the resistance to our calling, finding the courage to face our worst fears, and consequently expanding our possibilities. Especially when we go through life changes, the movies with these kinds of typical screenplays can help us access our courage to release the hurt that is stuck in the past and the fear and angst projected into the future. We follow the characters' process of letting go and learn to move into the present moment where we can take action with clarity.

For these film stories to be effective to help us heal and grow, they do not need to match our specific life circumstances. Our mind translates the allegoric messages from the movie into the appropriate guidance for our situation. The transformative power of symbols and metaphors has long been utilized in psychotherapy. Depth psychotherapy assumes that the unconscious communicates its content primarily in symbols. (Johnson, 1986). Other therapeutic approaches, like hypnotherapy for example, developed methods that impact the unconscious through metaphors and allegoric teaching tales because it is believed that they address the unconscious and bypass the conscious mind. Imagery that is stimulated through the symbolism seen in films increases feelings that otherwise have not been experienced in this way. With certain movies this process engages insight and creative problem solving by circumventing obsessive thought patterns.

The patterns of myth are used in the simplest comedy and in the most sophisticated drama. Films with this typical structure are often especially useful for work with clients who are going through changes in their lives. After clients have seen a movie with this screenplay structure, guiding questions in therapy help them to become aware of the connections between the film and their own situation.

Act One - Preparing Quest

- Preparing – establishing the mood, time, place; defining the quest and committing to it; surprise; releasing innocence

Act One is sometimes called the set up and usually occupies 25% of the movie's total length.

The focus here is establishing the mood, time and place of the quest of the main character, who is optimistic about his or her ability to achieve dreams and fulfill needs. This hero or heroine commits to a goal with a certain innocence. Toward the end of the first act, the main character is usually surprised by an event that requires him or her to release some of their idealism. At the end of act one there is an event that challenges the main character and requires a clarification of plans. He or she prepares for the challenge of overcoming the obstacles placed in the way of achieving the goal.

Act Two - Overcoming Obstacles

- Reacting - accepting challenge; feeling conflicted; reacting in old ways to new events; sudden understanding

Act Two takes up about 50% of the movie's length.

The main character starts off in the second act feeling conflicted about his or her ability to take on the challenge and overcome obstacles. This derives from a reluctance to release old ways of behaving which have worked in the past but may no longer be appropriate for achieving new goals. This stubbornness clouds their ability to see exactly what is happening in the current moment. The way out of this reacting stage is to break old behavior patterns that do not serve the new purpose, stop looking back to the past, and start responding to events as they occur.

If a client goes through a life transition, this part of a movie might correspond to a challenging, confusing and uncomfortable stage in their development. The first stage of Act One ends with the character's sudden understanding about their new direction and prepares the way for the new stage. He or she makes a turn and opens up to the possibility of taking on the challenge.

- Acting - can't go back; acting despite fear; initial success, new commitment; releasing old ideas; acting without fear

The first part of this stage is clouded with hesitancy to act due to an overriding sense of fear despite the initial success. Again, the character longs to go back to the way things were before. After the first half of the movie, there will be something that renews the sense of commitment to the quest, despite the mixed results occurring thus far.

An example is Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), when she holds a carrot to the sky and swears, "As God is my witness, I will never go hungry again!"

At this point a logic-defying turn happens. The viewer understands this pivotal transition point on a deep level as all intelligences that I mentioned earlier are engaged. Any attachment to preconceived ideas about the quest's specific outcomes must be released. This creates a flustered, frustrated and fatalistic sense about our ability to achieve anything.

The message of the movie at this point for the client is that the only thing he or she can do is to feel the anxiety and move forward. Like the character, the client learns to stop reacting in old ways, starts acting despite fears, and lets go of specific idealistic outcomes. The previous naïveté and innocence gets shed.

- Creating - revising plans into realistic goals

Now the character has a sense of knowingness about what actions to take and renewed confidence about what to expect. The fruits of all the learning are now preparing to bloom.

Act Three – Resolving

- Resolving Quest - new openness to life's opportunities; a surprise that is better than could be imagined at outset

Act Three takes about 25% of screen time.

It concludes the original quest initiated in the first act by resolving it from a new perspective. This act often mirrors the first act. "This is accomplished in three steps. First the original desires are realized – perhaps in a form not envisioned at the beginning of the quest. Next, there is an emotional commitment to a new way of life, with an emphasis on the flow of events and a new openness to life's opportunities. Finally, there is a surprise that is usually much better than could be imagined at the outset.

The goal for the client is to understand how to accomplish their desires from a new perspective of nonattachment and begin to enjoy the journey. When this is

achieved the client will have renewed trust that everything that is needed will be provided, possibly even a new sense of adventure.

Movies, Myths and Transformation

As just demonstrated, the patterns of myth are used in many fairy tales, novels, theater plays, and screenplays for movies. Therefore our responses to movies demonstrate recognition of certain layers of our unconscious. Films, like myths, tap into patterns of the collective unconscious. Their stories have such a powerful effect on clients because they speak directly to the heart and spirit, avoiding the resistance of the conscious mind. In doing so they help them in our personal process of healing and transformation.

If we make the following assumptions:

- That striving toward growth and transformation by working with and taking on life's challenges is part of human nature;
- That sometimes this impulse, and a client's capacity to respond to it in a healthy way, is compromised;
- That myths, as products of the collective unconscious, can help the client re-access this capacity through modeling;
- That movies express our evolving mythology;
- That many typical screenplays which mirror real-life transitions are structured in a way that is similar to myths;

then this conclusion makes sense:

- Watching certain movies can support a client's growth and transformation.

Therefore, movies connect clients on a mythological level, spurring them to live from their deepest, wisest self.

"As we evolve as a species, we hit certain key moments in that evolution when old ways are discarded and new maps of behavior are forged. Movies are the most electrifying communication medium ever devised and the natural conduit for inspiring ourselves to look into the eternal issues of who we are and why we are here." (Simon, 2002, p. xxi)

The following use of the movie *Lord of the Ring* Trilogy (2001, 2002, and 2003) in therapy demonstrates this process:

Review

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy is based on J.R.R. Tolkien's well-known novel. A little person (hobbit) with hairy feet, named Frodo, is entrusted with a mysterious ring. It is the One Ring, forged by the Dark Lord, Sauron, and capable of corrupting the wearer. Sauron's servants, the Ring Wraiths, are scouring Middle Earth for it, since, when it is returned to their master, nothing would be able to stop him. All of the world would plunged into

war. The only way to stop the evil will be to destroy the ring by casting it into the fire where it was forged - in Mordor, on the Dark Lord's doorstep.

Frodo starts his journey in the company of three other hobbits. Later, as the dangers mount, others join his company: the humans Aragorn and Boromir, the wizard Gandalf, the elf Legolas, and the dwarf Gimli. Together, these nine individuals must face ring wraiths, orcs, and worse; travel through the treacherous landscape of Middle-earth and the dreaded mines of Moria; and face mistrust within their fellowship.

The trilogy chronicles extraordinary adventures and reveals how the power of friendship, love and courage can hold the forces of darkness at bay.

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy seems especially full of mythological motifs; and almost every character embarks on a Hero's Journey. Maybe this explains the movie's special attraction for so many viewers.

Cinema Therapy

After I had seen Melanie (36) for several months, she understood that many of her problems were rooted in her hesitancy about embracing adulthood. She remembered that, as a child, she had "promised" herself in a Peter Pan like fashion not to grow up because the adult world seemed boring, cold, and dangerous. "I am afraid of what I might become", she said.

Consequently, Melanie holds a job that doesn't challenge her. She created some artwork but frequently struggled to meet the deadlines of art shows. She liked to hang out with her mostly younger friends and party. Often she experienced her life as unfulfilling and meaningless. Her mood swings had increased.

When Melanie heard about Cinema Therapy, our work took a dramatic turn. I learned that she loves to watch movies that tell epic and heroic stories. In fact, she watches them over and over again. She also enjoys exploring their metaphoric meaning and finding out why certain characters and scenes touch her. We started using these explorations to elevate her pre-conscious patterns to a more conscious level. This inspired her so much that she decided to write about her process.

Melanie first wrote about certain events that had forced her to face her fear of "growing up:

"For one, my body developed into that of a woman, all hips and boobs. The second was the death of my mother. Somehow it's difficult to continue to view myself as a child when she's dead, even if I've been successful in ignoring what my body had developed into. The third is the

realization that children are in an almost constant state of disempowerment. It's probably this last realization that's hit me the hardest. I'm unhappy with my current situation, and feel like I have no power to change it. I cannot continue to exist feeling I have no power, because the frustration and pain I feel from that far outweighs any consolation I might derive from 'keeping my promise'."

Melanie also wrote about her movie experience:

"One of the themes that attracted my attention in *The Lord of the Rings* is that of personal evolution. Each one of the members of *The Fellowship* is simultaneously a participant in two quests: one which revolves around the destruction of the ring, and another which revolves around the confrontation of demons/fears that obstruct that character's personal growth. Although each member of the Fellowship faces this challenge, the character I'm interested in at the moment is Gandalf the Grey. When he is first introduced into the story he enjoys eating, smoking and play. He's somewhat ragged, with unkempt hair/beard and a staff comprised of tangled roots at its end. He's also a bit unsure of himself. He's lost his edge from spending too much time with the Hobbits. A couple of events forced him to ultimately face the demon Balrog. They bring Gandalf to a point of no return. He fell, and what seemed like certain death resulted in Gandalf's evolution from Gandalf the Grey to Gandalf the White. [comment: these are crucial stages in the Hero's Journey]. Gandalf the White seems to have a very solid sense of himself, what "needs" to happen in certain circumstances, and in organizing others to make that happen."

After I read this, I suggested an exercise in which Melanie took on the roles of Gandalf the Grey and Gandalf the White while sitting in different chairs, speaking from the corresponding parts inside her. Consequently her process deepened significantly.

After this session she wrote:

"Looking at Gandalf's experience has helped me realize that I won't be a totally different person, just an evolved version of myself. I will be able to help myself as unfortunate circumstances present themselves, hence better able to help those around me. In fact, I would venture a guess, that forging on through these fears would help empower one's sense of self-love, which is of inestimable assistance in facing fears. It would seem to be the creation of an upward spiral that continually reinforces itself. What a wonderful tool in coping with LIFE!"

Guidelines for therapists to give to clients who focus on their personal transformation:

Keep the following questions and suggestions in mind while you watch:

1. Focus on the metaphorical meaning of this movie for you.
2. What parts of the movie touch you most?

3. *What character do you most identify with and when?*
4. *Notice how this hero goes through phases of hesitation, fear, meeting mentors, becoming aware that she cannot go back, facing tests, obstacles, and crises, confronting fear, gaining new perspective, and undergoing inner change (Stages of the "Hero's journey. Choose the parts that apply).*

Questions after the movie:

1. *How does this character's journey compare with yours?*
2. *Did this character develop certain capacities that you may have already developed or would like to develop as well?*

The Power of Projection

Projection is an interesting concept in this context. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* the verb "project" stems etymologically from Middle and Old French, as well as Greek and Latin for "throwing forward." Among others, the dictionary lists the following meanings for projection (Merriam-Webster's, 1998):

The display of motion pictures by projecting an image from them upon a screen and the act of perceiving a mental object as spatially and sensibly objective; also something so perceived or the attribution of one's own ideas, feelings, or attitudes to other people or to objects.

All three meanings are relevant here. First, the movie is projected on a white screen; then, everyone who watches these images projects a different meaning on what he or she sees. How and what we project depends on our view of the world, our history, and our personality.

Psychology uses the concept of projection in different ways. (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999) In the more orthodox texts it is seen as a mechanism of projecting our own unconscious or undesirable characteristics onto others. In psychoanalytic theory, for example, projection is seen as a defense mechanism in which various forbidden thoughts and impulses are attributed to another person rather than the self, thus warding off anxiety (e.g., "I hate you" becomes "You hate me"). This way we project our unpleasant feelings onto somebody else and blame them for thoughts that we really have. I call this the "narrow definition" of projection.

Getting to know our disowned parts can prevent us from acting out in an involuntary and undesired way. Becoming conscious and accepting these "shadow" qualities can help us become more authentic and whole human beings and even access our hidden potential. Understanding our projections guides us to more emotional healing and inner freedom.

If clients strongly dislike certain movie characters or their behavior, they need to consider that they might be projecting their own not yet fully conscious shortcomings onto them. These characters seem different from how these clients see themselves. Becoming consciously aware of these projections can help clients start accessing parts of their psyche that they weren't aware of. They learn that the negative traits they see in the characters or the character's behavior could be part of their own repressed "shadow" self.

For our further exploration in this context I find a more general definition of projection useful: Clients may also project their disowned positive qualities onto a film character, as they admire or idealize them. Admiring a character and his or her actions may point to qualities that are hidden from the clients' full awareness. Therefore, I also find it useful to explore the projection on movie characters of desirable characteristics that do not "fit" into the clients' self-image. Understanding this kind of projection helps clients recognize their admirable qualities. Gaining recognition of their positive character traits in this indirect way helps them in the process of learning to own these previously hidden qualities. In order for them to realize their full potential, these qualities need to be discovered and developed.

An even more general, very useful definition of projection includes the process of assuming that others feel, perceive, and act similarly to the way we feel, perceive, or act. Here projection refers to all conscious or unconscious interpretations of our life experience. According to this definition it is not necessary for a projected trait to be unconscious.

Clients are already conscious of many positive or negative traits that they project on a movie character. In therapy, they learn to remember these traits and to fully recognize and acknowledge them in themselves. This way their positive qualities can be strengthened. As they deepen their understanding of how they see themselves in a negative way, they become better able to either improve their shortcomings or let go of their negative perspective. It helps them to know that other people, who are like the film characters, struggle with similar deficiencies.

To clarify the process of projection the following are steps that clients go through as they watch a movie.

Stages of Cognitive and Emotional Interpretation through Identification and Projection

1. Disassociation

Client watches character(s) outside their internal frame of reference

1. Identification through projection

Client begins to identify with character, situation, etc.

2. Internalization

Client develops sense of ownership of what was felt through character, scene, situation and feels less alone

3. Inquiry into transference or projection

Client can examine and work with issues which were first safely “outside” and now have been identified

These stages can be described to clients in the following way:

1. Watching a character outside ourselves in a movie.
2. Beginning to identify with a character, scene, etc. - “I feel like a character,” or “I hate what he is doing.”
3. Starting to develop a sense of ownership of what was felt through a character or scene. “This feels exactly like my life.”
4. Examining and working with positive or negative qualities, which first were “outside of ourselves but on the screen” and now are recognized as our own.

Stages of Cognitive and Emotional Interpretation through Projection of Disowned Parts of Self

1. Disassociation

Client watches character(s) outside their internal frame of reference

2. Projection of disowned parts of self

Client begins to dislike or disapprove of character(s), their behavior, or certain attributes

3. Inquiry into transference or projection

Client examines whether rejected character(s), their behavior or attributes could be part of repressed self

4. Acknowledgement of disowned parts

Client explores ways to become more whole by embracing their repressed shadow self and therefore move toward emotional healing and inner freedom

These stages can be described to clients in the following way:

1. Watching a character outside ourselves in a movie.
2. Beginning to like or dislike a character, their behavior, or certain attributes that we do not recognize in ourselves.
3. Examining whether a character, their behavior, or attributes might be part of our not-yet-fully-recognized positive qualities or repressed “shadow” self.
4. Exploring ways to become more whole by embracing the projected positive qualities, in order to realize our full potential as well as acknowledging our repressed “shadow” self, to move toward emotional healing and inner freedom.

Clients are usually more open to acknowledge their projections on movie characters than projections on people in their life, especially on their therapist. After they understand the projections on film characters they are sometimes more ready for transference work.

Three Ways of Cinema Therapy

In the following systematic methodology the movie-watching experience is combined with effective traditional therapeutic methods.

I distinguish between the following approaches: *The Evocative Way*, *The Prescriptive Way*, and *The Cathartic Way*. These three ways can also be combined with each other.

➤ The Evocative Way

No need to recommend specific movies to client

➤ The Prescriptive Way

Specific movies are prescribed

➤ The Cathartic Way

Specific movies or type of movies are recommended

The Evocative Way

One way of utilizing movies in a therapeutic and growth-provoking manner borrows from dream work. As it is possible to gain insights from any dream, emotional responses to almost any kind of movie can teach clients to understand themselves better. Films can be seen as the “collective dreams” of our times. When certain movies resonate with clients, they touch into the unconscious part of their psyche. A film may move them deeply. A character or a scene might also upset them intensely. Understanding their emotional responses to movies, just as understanding their nighttime dreams, can serve as a window to their unconscious. Both are ways to bring their unconscious inner world to a conscious level.

One of the most effective ways of using dreams to tap the wisdom of the unconscious can be found in Jeremy Taylor’s book *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill*. (Taylor, 1993) I have adapted some of his basic principles for interpretation and utilization of dreams to the process of self-discovery and growth through films. As clients understand their responses to movie characters, they will get to know themselves in ways they were previously unaware. Consequently these responses will teach them how to reach increased health and wholeness. This is possible because expanded awareness alone often helps them to let go of unhealthy patterns and reconnect with their authentic self. In case insight alone is not sufficient, I will suggest additional therapeutic tools.

➤ Exploring disowned material

❖ Negative and positive reactions

Exploring negative reactions to a movie character might help clients to discover disowned or repressed shadow parts of their psyche. This expanded awareness

can help clients to let go of unhealthy patterns that resulted from their disowned self, and they can reconnect with their authentic self.

The following work with the movie *The Upside of Anger* (2005) demonstrates how a movie can be used in *The Evocative Way* with shadow material.

Review:

Director-writer Mike Binder, himself a child of divorce, tells the story of a sharp-witted suburban wife Terry, who awakens one morning to find that her husband of more than twenty years has unexpectedly walked out of the marriage. All signs point to his having fled the country to begin a new life in Sweden with his secretary, and never to return. She plunges into a burning anger against him for this betrayal and begins each day by trying to bury her rage in booze.

Terry's husband left her to care for four headstrong daughters by herself. Their problems complicate her life even further. College-aged Hadley and her mother haven't gotten along for years, and things only get worse when Hadley introduces boyfriend Dave to the family. High school senior Andy doesn't want to go to college and is dating a man much too old for her. Emily refuses to eat. She wants to be a ballet dancer, which her mother doesn't approve of. Young Popeye is learning about love from a boy who can't reciprocate her feelings. The girls dress expensively, prepare the family meals, and run the household, while their mother slips into a world of bitterness. Terry makes no bones about her excessive drinking, even challenging her daughters to make an issue of her drowning her sorrows.

Daughter Popeye, the narrator of the film, states that all the sweetness of her mother's life in the past has vanished and been replaced by rage against their father. This teenager's way of dealing with the tension in the household is to create a video dealing with the destruction in the world brought on by anger and violence.

Soon their neighbor and Terry's husband's friend, Denny, a "retired", once-great star pitcher for the Detroit Tigers turned radio disk jockey, becomes fascinated with Terry and her daughters. Denny's arrival on the scene is awkward, at first, but a genuine liking takes hold between him and Terry and an odd sort of mating ritual begins. When she offers him a quickie, as part of a campaign to get even with her departed husband, Denny hides in his yard. They appear like two imperfect, alcoholic, resentful ordinary people in the suburbs, with enough money to support themselves in the discontent to which they have become accustomed.

The domestic chaos leaves Terry's daughters out on a limb. They want their old mother back, but are forced to juggle their mom's emotional outbursts and romantic dilemmas as well as their own.

Although Denny starts out as a drinking buddy for Terry, he slowly evolves into her romantic partner, a source of strength, and eventually into an ad-hoc father to her daughters. The film plays out the relationships among all of them.

Eventually an unexpected twist creates a sense of resolution and calmness for the family.

Cinema Therapy

*After viewing *The Upside of Anger*, a member of my weekly Cinema Therapy group, Evelyn, told the group that she hated the character Terry because she saw her as selfish, rude, heartless, and abusing her authority as a parent. Evelyn's uncharacteristically strong negative reaction made me wonder whether this character might be forcing her to confront disowned parts of herself.*

I asked her how aggression was handled in her family of origin. Evelyn remembered that no one ever yelled. Everyone was nice to everyone else. When she tried to express disagreement, her mom told her, "Do not say anything if you cannot say something nice."

Evelyn also told us that usually, when her husband starts a fight, she does not express anger or frustration. She hates conflict and believes that she would lose an argument anyway. Once in a while, however, when her husband goes too far, much to Evelyn's surprise and embarrassment, intense rage suddenly breaks out of her and she has to have a drink.

Evelyn also told us that she has very good relationships with her colleagues and bosses at work. She is not completely happy at work though, because several times she has been passed by for promotion. This puzzles her because she always completes her tasks diligently. Pushier colleagues, who have also taken more initiative in certain projects, have been promoted instead of her. Evelyn also remembered that she sometimes has a secret desire to demonstrate stronger boundaries with people who take advantage of her at work. This desire makes her feel selfish—she is ashamed of it.

Evelyn has been aware of her fear of conflict all along. Reflecting on her family history, she started to consider that she might have repressed her aggressive impulses as well as her selfish needs. She also surmised that

assertiveness, strength, determination, and creativity might have ended up in her “shadow bag” too.

Soon Evelyn started to become more aware of angry emotions, feeling them fully, without acting them out, and just sitting with them. Consequently her anger transformed itself. Evelyn became more assertive, first in our group and consequently at home and at work. Her embarrassing outbursts, followed by drinking, stopped.

In psychoanalytic theory, projection is seen as a defense mechanism in which various forbidden thoughts and impulses are attributed to another person rather than the self, thus warding off anxiety. Getting to know these disowned parts prevents clients from acting out in an involuntary and undesired way. Becoming conscious and accepting these “shadow” qualities can also help clients become more authentic human beings and access their hidden potential.

Guidelines for therapists

First rule out that the client didn't have a strong negative reaction to a character because she, or somebody she cares about, has been emotionally hurt or disappointed by someone of whom the movie character reminds her of.

Possible questions after the movie:

- 1. What do you believe is the reason for your strong negative emotional response to a film character or his behavior?*
- 2. Do you remember a time in your life when a well-meaning person told you that she noticed a similar undesirable attitude or trait in you as that displayed by the movie character?*
- 3. Is it possible that you disliked the character or his behavior so intensely because you were told that you should never be this way? Therefore you try to be different.*
- 4. If so, are there any related, desirable qualities that might stay hidden together with the unacceptable ones?*
- 5. Do you get a sense of the potential that you might develop if you started owning some of these qualities? How do you feel when you sense your related, latent inner resources?*

The same concept of projection can be true for disowned positive qualities. If clients resonate with a movie character in a positive or admiring way, a subsequent inquiry in session can help them discover their latent and not fully conscious capacities and inner resources.

The following therapeutic work with the movie *Ray* (2005) demonstrates how a movie can be used in *Evocative Way* with disowned positive qualities:

Review

Ray tells the life story of the late iconic musical genius and American legend, Ray Charles. Although this movie plays primarily between 1948 and 1965, it also cuts back to the artist's roots. Charles was born into a poor family in Albany, Georgia. At age five he witnessed the death of his younger brother. In a memory that haunted him throughout his life, he stood nailed to the spot while the little boy drowned in a bath basin. In her deep despair his mom yelled at Ray, "why didn't you call for me to rescue the boy?" A few months later, Charles contracted glaucoma, and went completely blind at age seven. He blamed himself for the accidental death and carried lifelong guilt that, the movie argues, contributed to his eventual drug addiction.

With the staunch support of his fiercely independent single mother, who insisted he make it on his own in the world, Charles found his calling and his gift behind a piano keyboard. Touring across the Southern musical circuit, the soulful singer discovered his own sound, which revolutionized American popular music. His work reached worldwide fame when he incorporated gospel, country, jazz and orchestral influences into his inimitable style.

This film demonstrates how Ray Charles contributed to tearing down the walls that separate people and styles. As he revolutionized music, he simultaneously fought cruel prejudices against the blind, and racial segregation in the very clubs that launched him. He also championed artists' rights within the corporate music business.

As Ray's fame grew, so did his weakness for drugs and women, until they threatened to strip away the very things he held most dear. The genius of Ray Charles was nearly destroyed through the use of heroin, as he spent years in denial.

It wasn't until he was about to lose his family and his career, and spend years in prison, that he cleaned up. He broke down the barrier of drugs, which had caused segregation in his own life: the separation from his wife and kids. As the movie demonstrates the challenging process through which Ray Charles finally was able to defeat his own personal demons, it brings our attention to an inspiring and unforgettable true story of human triumph.

Cinema Therapy

My client, Barbara, (54) was dissatisfied with her life. Since her childhood she had unsuccessfully tried to lose weight. Her work in a managerial position in a big organization for more than 20 years had become increasingly dissatisfying. Because writing poetry and painting pictures inspired her, we had explored her artistic talents and dreams. But she still rarely engaged in creative pursuits.

One day Barbara came to her session telling me that she was deeply touched by the movie Ray. In response to my inquiry she told me that what effected her most were two things: Ray Charles' amazing creativity and the fact that he may have developed blindness because he felt responsible for his little brother's death. Barbara speculated: "If he had already been blind when his brother drowned, he could not have blamed himself for the death." The direction in which this answer seemed to point surprised me.

From experience I knew that, in all likelihood, my client was moved by Ray's tragedy and had shared this response with me, because she was ready to express and explore previously unexplored preconscious material. My next question was a stab in the dark though: I asked her how the connection between a theme of responsibility and physical symptoms might have appeared her own life.

After Barbara listened inward for a while she said: "I think that I might have developed obesity in my childhood because of a sense of responsibility for my mother after her divorce." My client's mother was a competitive, strikingly beautiful artist. Pretty soon Barbara saw that she unconsciously felt responsible to protect her emotionally needy mom from potential jealousy toward her as a young girl and teenager by overeating and withholding from artistic engagement. In my mind I wondered whether this object relation might still sabotage her attempts to lose weight, to achieve satisfaction in her creative endeavors, and therefore find fulfillment in her live.

Consequently we explored whether a part of Barbara's psyche still might hold onto a need for protecting her mom. As this understanding deepened over time, my client developed the capacity to keep her weight off.

I also asked Barbara whether she remembers certain experiences of her own creativity, unfolding in similar ways to the one she had seen on the screen. When she recalled several incidences, we explored these stories for a while. By doing so, as well as by bringing her attention to the physical sensations that were associated with remembering these experiences, she

deepened her connection with her artistic nature. Pretty soon Barbara's inner work bore fruit. Holding Ray Charles in the back of her mind, she found deep and consistent joy in her creative pursuits.

The Evocative Way helped Barbara let go of inhibitions to her artistic nature. After Ray became the catalyst for increased awareness of old unhealthy patterns in her relationship with her mother, she eventually overcame longstanding problems.

Biographically inspired movies frequently have a more powerful impact on the viewer than those that are based on a fantasy screenplay. I found that many of my workshop participants and clients, like Barbara, feel more deeply touched by a biographical motion picture, because they empathize strongly with the historical figure that they perceive behind the film character.

The opposite effect can also be true for some viewers. If this type of film hits too close to home, it sometimes activates a defensive structure and therefore inhibits deeper self-exploration.

Guidelines for therapists

Suggestions for clients while they watch the film:

- 1. Focus on the metaphorical meaning of this movie for you.*
- 2. What parts of the movie touch you most?*
- 3. What character do you most identify with and when?*

Questions after the movie:

- 1. As you reflect on the parts that touched you most, how does the movie character's experiences remind you of your own? Do certain themes in the film reflect themes of your own life?*
- 2. Do you get a glimpse of the capacities that you recognize in an admired movie character inside yourself? How do you feel when you sense the potential of these inner resources?*

As will be describe more in detail later, how the following therapeutic methods are especially conducive to a combination with the movie watching experience when Cinema Therapy is practiced in the Evocative Way:

- ❖ Parts work
- ❖ Couples, family, and group therapy
- ❖ Interactive hypnotherapy or imagery work
- ❖ Suggestive hypnotherapy
- ❖ EMDR - resource installation, peak performance EMDR

The Prescriptive Way

“Psychotherapists continually strive to find stratagems to help their patients ‘see the obvious’. What tools we have in movies for our armamentarium! Precious images of sight and sound, imagined and acted truly, and now thanks to new technologies, readily accessible through rental from the local video store. ... Patients can be pointed to key scenes, which they can watch easily over and over as they practice their own new skills.” (Kalm, 2004, p. iii)

The Prescriptive Way is based on the assumption that watching a movie can put clients into a light trance state, similar to the state often achieved via guided visualizations. This kind of trance work is designed to help clients get in touch with a mature and wise part of themselves that helps them overcome problems and strengthen positive qualities.

In *The Prescriptive Way*, specific films are prescribed to model specific problem-solving behavior or to access and develop a client's potential. Milton Erickson's concept of *Teaching Tales* with their embedded suggestions is applied in *The Prescriptive Way*.

Through *The Prescriptive Way* clients can also learn “by proxy” how not to do something or not to behave because they see the negative consequences of a character's action. (Solomon, 2001) I often use movies in this way, when I work with clients who struggle with addictions, for example, or when I work with couples on their communication. Here films are used as cautionary tales.

The following responses to the movie *About Schmidt* (2002) demonstrate how a movie can be used in *The Prescriptive Way*:

Review

About Schmidt is an intricate character study of a man who falls into the abyss of retirement and widowhood then gradually climbs out of it by getting in touch with his heart. His salvation comes inadvertently, through a one-way series of letters he writes to an orphan in Tanzania.

As the movie begins we learn that Warren Schmidt, for decades, felt displaced in his own home, evaded family conflicts and defined himself by his work. He appears to lack even the slightest spark of intellectual curiosity or passion. Days after a meaningless retirement dinner he returns to the office only to find that his young replacement has upgraded Warren's entire system and discarded his files, using none of the legacy of business acumen Warren left behind.

At home his wife Helen tries to be cheerful and surprises him with breakfast in a new RV. The stale dialogue displays a yawning absence of meaning in their marriage. Neither understands any longer who they are to one another. One night Warren finds himself, after 42 years of marriage, asking, "Who is this old woman next to me in bed?" But when he returns home one day to discover Helen has dropped dead on the kitchen floor, his life quickly unravels.

Even as ineffectually as his marriage and work filled the void of his life, when both suddenly vanish Warren sinks into a depression. Then, at the nadir of his decline, he decides to adopt and sponsor a six-year old African boy for 73 "precious" cents a day. The viewer is given few clues as to why he decides to take this action. But as the film plays out, in hindsight it appears as if in this act he is subconsciously grasping a lifeline. A second lifeline falls his way equally as "accidentally," when Warren decides to take to the road in the RV in order to stop his daughter from making a tragic mistake by going through with her wedding.

En route to "save" his daughter, Warren flexes the wings of his new freedom by trying his hand at social relationships. But having practiced few social skills during his life, his attempts fail, either because he is oblivious to the other person's feelings or because he is bound by his own fears. His daughter keeps him at arm's length when he ham-handedly tries to intervene in her wedding. Her fiancée's liberated mother makes casual romantic advances and it scares him to death. Later, when temporary neighbors at an RV park invite him to dinner, he misinterprets the situation miserably, makes a pass at the neighbor's wife and gets thrown out.

But throughout this series of social catastrophes, Warren continues to write his adopted "son." The long confessional letters provide Warren his one honest emotional outlet. It's almost as if he were writing them to his own long-orphaned inner child. Eventually, when he receives news of the benefits his sponsorship has on the boy's life, he sheds real tears of joy, and we realize that slowly, this accidental "therapy" has had its effect. Despite the botched efforts to connect to people, Warren begins to feel alive, reborn. He starts to appreciate himself and his defenses begin to dissolve.

Cinema Therapy

About Schmidt can be thought provoking, perhaps even transformative. It can serve as both a negative or positive model for clients.

With the baby boomer generation approaching retirement, an increasing number of our clients find themselves struggling with the vacuum created

when the most significant parts of their lives — work and sometimes family relationships — begin to come to an end. Though certainly no panacea, *About Schmidt* can serve as a both positive and negative model for individuals seeking to add meaning to their lives.

One example of how it can serve as a warning comes from Roger who posted this note to my Web site, cinematherapy.com: “*About Schmidt* is one of the most depressing movies I have seen this year. Can a film affect you that negatively, [and] yet have an upside in cinema therapy? The message to me was don't sit on your butt waiting for something to happen to you after retirement, start planning now. I have, in fact, begun discussing it with my wife and we have had a number of excellent plans. Retirement will begin with the purchase of a Winnebago. We'll see where life takes us after that.”

An anecdote about a client, Becky, aptly demonstrates how the film can serve as a positive model as well. Becky felt depressed as she struggled with mid-life questions of meaning and purpose. I encouraged her to watch *About Schmidt*. In our following session she said she was inspired and reassured that she was not the only person caught in this predicament. Becky especially focused on Warren's internal monologue and could relate to the discrepancy between his thoughts and actions, which made her laugh and allowed her to view her own lack of authenticity without getting trapped in self-criticism. Seeing the effect of Warren's letter-writing process prompted her to begin daily journaling, advice she'd resisted for months. As Becky wrote about her deepest inner truth she gradually dared to get in touch with emotions that she had previously guarded from the world. This awareness process supported our work immensely. When my client's self-acceptance and authenticity increased, her depression lifted.

Guidelines for therapists

Tell clients before they watch the movie:

1. Keep the following question in mind while you watch: What makes Warren Schmidt such an “empty” and depressed person?
2. What helps him start changing?

Ask clients after they watch the movie:

1. Is it possible there are things you are not aware of - like Schmidt?
2. Did Schmidt demonstrate something that you need to avoid and other behavior that you might want to adopt?
3. Do you have inner resources that Schmidt doesn't have?

The following therapeutic methods are especially recommended in combination with the movie-watching experience when Cinema Therapy is practiced in the *Prescriptive Way* and therefore will be described in detail later:

- ❖ Cognitive therapy
- ❖ Morty Lefkoe's *Decision Maker Process*

The Cathartic Way

Our cultural preference for processing emotions cognitively instead of feeling them in our bodies tends to maintain and prolong distress. Nichols & Zax, 1977) Emotions are stored in the body, not only the mind. Cathartic therapeutic techniques allow therapists to help clients access these stored emotions and release them. These methods are based on the assumption that the more catharsis clients experience, the faster they move through the healing process. (Nichols & Bierenbaum 1978)

Painful emotions can do more than produce tears; they have also been proven to create stress chemicals in our bodies. Catharsis helps to counter these by releasing buried feelings. Nature has provided us natural cathartic processes like laughing and crying to move us through and beyond our pain.

Because many films transmit ideas through emotion rather than intellect, they can neutralize the instinct to suppress feelings and trigger emotional release. By eliciting emotions, watching movies can open doors that otherwise might stay closed. For many of our clients it is safer and therefore easier to let go of their defenses while watching a movie than it is in real life with real people. By identifying with certain characters and their predicaments, they can experience emotions that lie hidden from their awareness.

Aristotle theorized, "Tragic plays have the capacity to purify the spirit and aid us in coping with aspects of life that cannot be reconciled by rational thought." He insisted on the cathartic power of tragedy because it "cleanses disordered emotions and heals trauma." (Murnaghan, 1951)

Sometimes tears flow over a sentimental film but not in real life, especially under duress. Watching and empathizing with a movie character who experiences tragedy can stimulate the desired emotional release. This release usually lifts a client's spirits for a little while as the overwhelming emotion diminishes. Energy that was drained by depression can reemerge, at least temporarily. Often this "break" allows a depressed person to start exploring and healing the underlying issues that caused the depression originally. Grief can be processed more easily too.

The following work with the movie *In America* (2003) demonstrates how a movie can be used in *The Cathartic Way*:

Review

In America offers a unique and moving look at a family's devastating grief over the accidental death of a son and brother, who also had a brain tumor. Stephanie Ericsson wrote: "Grief ... is the ashes from which the phoenix rises. ... Grief will make a new person out of you, if it doesn't kill you in the making." Although *In America* demonstrates how intense, chaotic, contradictory, and heart-wrenching emotions can be when we are grieving, it also reveals that this nightmarish process can become transformative.

The movie also tells Jim Sherdian's semi-autobiographical story about the so-called "immigrant experience" that is as much about family dynamics as about the struggle to survive in unfamiliar surroundings. The story starts with the Irish family sneaking across the Canadian border into the US as illegal immigrants.

Johnny, the young father, wants to be an actor. Since the death of his son, he has suppressed his emotions, which threatens his career. The mother, Sarah, is an exhausted and deeply grief-struck woman who swings back and forth between depression and moments of elation while she tries to fulfill her obligations as a mother, wife, and breadwinner. In spite of their best efforts, the marriage is in danger of disintegration. Their eleven-year-old daughter, Christy, shoots videos of everything with her low-cost camcorder and serves as a voiceover narrator of the story, writing letters to her diseased brother, Frankie. Christy's gregarious younger sister, Ariel, who almost always has a smile in her face, demonstrates the soulfulness of children whose wonder and imagination can carry them through an ocean of difficulties.

It's presumed that the family's move to America was meant as an escape from the tragedy back in Ireland; yet, even with the change in scenery, both parents struggle with overwhelming feelings of guilt. Sarah urges her husband to use his talents as an actor for the kids' sake: "Make believe you're happy!" But Christy breaks through the denial as a sounding board and unforgiving judge: "I've been carrying this family on my back for over a year." Eventually, looking for a means to end the pain, Sarah gets pregnant. But their challenges continue when the doctor tells them that there could be life-threatening complications with the birth.

The family lives in a New York City tenement building, where they are confronted with racism and drug addiction. There is one door, which has the words KEEP AWAY painted on in big orange letters. Here lives, as

called by the girls, "a man who screams" because his anguish sometimes echoes up the stairs. The girls' innocence and implicit faith in others allows them to approach this gentle giant, Mateo, without fear, rather than to cower away from him like other tenants. Later, when he joins them for dinner, Ariel says "You're magic." And she is right with her intuitive response.

Everything shifts when Mateo and Johnny face each other in anger and unexpected insights are triggered. Mateo continues to be the catalyst for emotional changes in the family and for different ways of seeing. Especially in the final episode the movie boosts the human spirit and suggests that small miracles do exist.

Cinema Therapy

Movies like *In America*, used as an adjunct to grief therapy, can serve as a catalyst for suppressed emotions. Sometimes tears flow over a sentimental film but not in real life. Emotional release can lift clients' spirits for a while. Energy that was drained by depression can reemerge, at least temporarily. With therapeutic guidance this "break" frequently allows clients to open up to the grieving process or explore the issues that have inhibited healthy mourning. They may also feel less alone in their pain. Film characters often serve as either negative or positive models for the grieving process. Their story can also help clients recognize the transformational potential in grief.

My 40-year-old client, Kevin, had lost his sickly younger sister, Kate, to heart failure when they were children. Because he feared that peers would make fun of him, he never cried. Although his parents had told him that Kate's death was not his fault because she suffered from an incurable heart condition, Kevin felt responsible. He believed: "I shouldn't have encouraged her to play with me the day before she died". Since then, every year around the anniversary of her death Kevin felt depressed. When he suspected that there might be some unresolved grief, he entered therapy.

Our work progressed well. However, the most significant breakthrough happened after Kevin watched *In America*. As he recognized the family's pain in the film, tears started flowing for the first time. In our next session he told me that these were his "un-cried" tears over the loss of little Kate. More grief surfaced during the following weeks. First Kevin was afraid that "something must be wrong with me that I felt so sad". With the help of some guiding questions (see below) Kevin started to accept his mourning as a healing process and felt more normal. He experienced the movie characters like a support group. Subsequently we worked with his guilt going back and forth between his inner experiences and observing the

movie characters. Pretty soon Kevin found peace around his loss and even felt inspired to volunteer in a children's hospital.

Guidelines for therapists

Before the movie:

If the movie elicits emotions, let yourself feel them and cry as much as you like.

- 1. Ask clients to notice ...*
- 2. how Johnny's and Sarah's negative, self-defeating beliefs and their resistance to grief slowly change*
- 3. how they develop a new sense of self, compassion, and purpose when they finally give themselves permission to grieve*
- 4. the characters take small acts of courage in spite of fear*
- 5. their determination and endurance helps them become stronger.*

After the movie:

- 1. How do you feel about the character's experience of grief and guilt in relation to your own?*
- 2. What did you see in the film that reminds you of your own inner and outer resources?*
- 3. Have you discovered transformational gifts of grief after experiencing a loss before, similar to the family in the movie?*

Cathartic psychotherapy tells us that laughter too releases emotion. (Klein, 1988). It provides the physical process that releases tension, stress, and pain, physically as well as emotionally. Laughter decreases stress hormones, increases pain-relieving hormones, and activates our immune system. As it does, it enriches our clients' body's biological drug store.

The late author Norman Cousins wrote about watching humorous films as part of his recovery from degenerative disease: "Ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep." (Cousin, 1979, p. 39) Increased physical well-being most often improves our psychological state.

Laughter can also relieve anxiety as well as reduce aggression and fear. Many clients have told me that after watching a humorous movie they were able to approach a solution to a problem they were worried about with less emotional involvement and a fresh and creative perspective. Even light depression can lift for a while.

Clients respond differently to different kinds of humorous or sad movies. With their unique sensibilities, some of them like intellectual humor, some gallows humor,

some slapstick, etc. A “one-hanky” film for one person might be a “five-hanky” movie for somebody else. Therefore clients will find the best emotional release when they choose a movie using their own experience of your typical emotional responses.

Watching Movies with Conscious Awareness

Many psychotherapeutic and spiritual orientations recognize the healing power of awareness. The Jewish Talmud points out that normally we do not see what we think we see, that what we perceive is more a reflection of us than it is objectively *it*. Everything we experience is altered and shaped by our minds. Our desires filter our selection of the items that we perceive. Our emotions color those perceptions. And finally, our attention wanders from perception to perception, virtually guaranteeing that what we see of the world and ourselves is mostly inaccurate.

Buddhism makes the same basic observation and gives it a name: *mindlessness*. In this usage, the term includes the *absentmindedness* that we mean when we say “mindless,” but it encompasses more, too — that our awareness is clouded, that we are *spiritually* asleep.

Wise men, poets, storytellers, and philosophers have echoed this idea throughout the ages. Today, many psychologists agree with the idea that mindlessness, in the Buddhist sense, is very common, much more so than we might realize.

Mindlessness conditions us to replace authentic experience with habitual responses. Think about our state of mind when we are tired, ill or in pain: we tend to have a short attention span and little patience. We often react with fear or anger and regress into old childhood patterns we thought we had outgrown. In such a low state of awareness, our motives and emotions are most likely to be habitual. It is no wonder that we often miss important details or react from an unhealthy place.

In *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?* Daniel Goleman provides a commentary on meetings between him, the Dalai Lama, and world-class scientists and philosophers (Goleman, 2003). They discuss new findings with high-tech devices that permit scientists to peer inside the brain centers responsible for calming the inner storms of rage and fear. Experiments have demonstrated that awareness training strengthens emotional stability and greatly enhances our positive moods.

In an excellent study of such destructive emotions, the two main characters in the movie *Changing Lanes* (2002) begin to follow their impulses to their ultimate conclusion. Happily, they stop short when their own actions raise their consciousness.

Review

Two hotheads become locked in escalating rounds of retaliation when a morning rush hour fender bender causes both to miss crucial court deadlines. As he is rushing off to court from the accident, attorney Gavin hands the other man his card and says "Better luck next time!" then accidentally drops a signed form that means millions to his firm. A moment later, after Gavin refuses to give him a ride, Doyle, the other driver in the accident who is a recovering alcoholic, finds the attorney's form. When Gavin shows up at court without it, the judge gives him until the end of the day to produce it or his firm forfeits the money.

Meanwhile, Doyle wants to convince his ex-wife not to move with his children to Oregon. He hopes that by keeping his family nearby he might save his failing marriage. To accomplish that, he needs to prove to a divorce judge that he is solvent and stable and plans to do so by showing him that the bank has approved his home loan. But because of a flat tire caused by the accident he shows up twenty minutes late and finds the case has been decided without him. Blaming Gavin, he takes out his rage by taunting him with a page faxed from the form that he found. Gavin retaliates by getting a hacker friend to artificially ruin Doyle's credit rating. A spiraling series of attacks and counterattacks eventually leads both men to see that their worst enemy is their own anger.

Gavin and Doyle keep trying to demonstrate their individual power by acting out their anger at the other person. For one whole day they do not have the awareness or the inner container that would help them with their destructive emotions.

In this film we see two men hit an emotional bottom. But they learn from their experience. By the end of the day, each man's own anger scares him more than the other person. After reacting only to the actions of the other in unconscious ways for a long time, both became aware of themselves, their own behavior, and the subsequent consequences. This enabled both men to start taking responsibility for their actions, develop empathy for the other, and find inner peace again.

Cinema Therapy

A client of mine, a young woman named Nancy, came to see me to work on her sudden outbreaks of anger. She was afraid that her uncontrolled outbursts might damage her marriage. First Nancy learned different ways of managing her anger, but rage would sometimes well up in her so suddenly and strongly that she felt overtaken and out of control.

Things became more manageable when she learned to become consciously aware of the very first onset of rage toward her husband, Rob. Exploring the possible origins of her anger also led to enlightening insights. But Nancy's real breakthrough happened after I asked her to watch the video Changing Lanes. I instructed her to watch the movie while simultaneously applying the concept of conscious awareness. Her husband watched the film with her.

In our next session Nancy told me that at first she completely identified with Doyle and his anger when Gavin said: "Better luck next time!" She started yelling at Gavin on the television. "How can you do this!" She almost got into another fight with her husband who had a more removed perspective and questioned Doyle's response to the insult. Nancy felt angry about the indifference she thought she had perceived in Rob. In her already upset state she could not objectively hear what he said. She understood him to say something like "So what?" in response to Gavin's "Better luck next time!" But rather than get into a fight with Rob, she remembered my suggestion about conscious awareness and noticed what had just happened inside her. They turned off the video and talked.

Having just seen on the screen almost exactly what she experienced inside, it was much easier for Nancy to step back and reflect on what happened as her anger rose in her. Normally, when she would feel herself being drawn into her rage, it was impossible to take this conscious internal step back. Now, with the support of the distancing effect of the movie, plus her effort to become more aware of her emotional responses, Nancy suddenly saw how she had been caught in a very familiar pattern. She was surprised how absurd her previous reaction looked to her now and clearly recognized the process in which she tended to fall into blind rages over and over in her life.

Being "blinded" in this way, at first Nancy had not been able to understand Rob's perspective when he made the comment on the movie character's behavior. But after her breakthrough, she told me, "I really get it now. When I'm angry I do not hear what he really says." With more conscious awareness her perspective opened up to a more objective view of what he said. Now she understood what Rob really meant and that he was including both characters' perspective. From this new angle she thought that his comments just reflected his way of seeing things in general, which now seemed acceptable to her.

Nancy told me she felt as if she had awakened from a bad dream. For the first time, she understood on a deep level how this blinding mechanism had completely distorted her perspective of reality and how it robbed her of her capacity to see things objectively. After they talked, she and Rob finished watching the rest of the movie. Nancy said she had

a much clearer perspective during this part of the film and enjoyed it much more than before.

*Nancy also mentioned another benefit of this process. The movie provided a voice for her to communicate something she was unable to explain before. Previously, Rob never took seriously her efforts to work on her rage in therapy. Now, during their discussion, he saw Nancy struggling and conquering her “demon” right in front of him. Afterwards she had even been able to explain the process she had just gone through. It helped that both of them witnessed the movie characters acting out their anger so destructively for a big part of the movie. Rob actually saw “two” movies: *Changing Lanes* and Nancy’s process. He was able to see the difference in Nancy’s efforts as well as her level of awareness. Rob became very impressed with the progress she had made in her inner work.*

*In our session I suggested she ask Rob to remind her of the awakening process she had gone through while watching *Changing Lanes*. I told her to have Rob mention the character Doyle’s name in a lighthearted or humorous way whenever he saw her falling into anger or rage. This would help her tune in to the same process in a split second and bring back the awareness she had gained that previous night. Nancy agreed and thought that this also might be fun for both of them.*

Weeks later Nancy told me she had experienced only one small episode of rage, which ended almost immediately when Rob followed my suggestion. As she was able to become centered and rational again, Nancy now could address more clearly the real reason for her anger. Rob was able to listen calmly and hear what she had to say.

When clients start watching movies with conscious awareness, they experience a psychological strengthening process and create a “larger inner container” for their undesired emotions, so that they can hold them consciously. The more they learn to be able to tolerate unwanted feelings while watching a movie, the less they feel compelled to suppress them or act out against themselves or others in their real life. Instead, they become strong enough to resist acting out. And the more they practice, the more confident they will be.

I usually explain to my clients the following:

Let's first look at the connection between conscious awareness and inner wisdom. When you experience a movie, or anything else in your life with conscious awareness, you increase your capacity to access your inner wisdom. Inner wisdom is more than knowledge. Whereas knowledge is simply acquired information, wisdom requires understanding on a deep level. “Knowledge informs us, wisdom transforms us.” Walsh, 1999, p. 214).

Since our rational mind is only a small part of the portal to your inner wisdom, I suggest a process in which you watch and listen with your whole body, not simply your mind. Body awareness helps you to access inner wisdom through a felt sense rather than through mental perceptions. Our awareness of our physical reactions, especially our breath, is an important vehicle to increasing awareness. The reason is that even when our mind has become disconnected from our authentic experience, our breath usually remains locked into it. Sometimes, when we attempt to mask our feelings, our breath can sometimes give them away despite our best efforts to hide them. Perhaps this is nature's way of ensuring a certain degree of emotional transparency between the creatures of the world. Ironically, even when our breath, or some other body-language sign, broadcasts our true feelings for all to see despite our best efforts to hide them, often we are the only ones fooled by the deception.

Tapping this potential key to greater awareness is a technique you can learn. A good place to begin is to find out what happened to your authentic feelings and why your body is still connected to them. The problem usually begins during infancy. Most young children quickly learn that it can be dangerous to express their full range of emotions. As they learn to hide undesired feelings from their parents, siblings, and the rest of the world, they also hide them from themselves. Gradually, they stifle their own awareness of their true state of being and learn to distrust themselves. Gaining awareness of our physical reactions, especially our breath can reveal buried experiences. One sign of neurosis is that we "forgo self-awareness for self-consciousness." When self-conscious we project our minds outward toward others' reactions to us.

As we increase our awareness, we regain fresh, uncontaminated, whole sight. For example, as we notice a tension or an expansion in our chest, how our breaths vary, or other reactions to movie scenes and their messages, they show us our biases and pinpoint the way to our healing. (Sinetar, 1993) As you become aware of a physical sensation that is triggered by emotions during a movie experience, you increase your capacity to tolerate unwanted emotions without needing to suppress them, to numb out, act out, or release them in other unhealthy ways. You do not need to resist these feelings any more because you experienced them as just another energy in your body. Without resistance your emotions can run their course and do not get unnecessarily stronger. This can be seen as a desensitization process.

With the technique of "watching movies with conscious awareness", I introduce a new way of creating a state of dual awareness as it is found in many and varied psychotherapeutic modalities, such as *Somatic Experiencing*, developed by Peter Levine (Levine & Frederick 1997); *Focusing*, developed by Eugene Gendlin (Gendlin, 1982); Sensorimotor Sequencing (Ogden & Minton, 2000); or

the Buddhist's mindfulness. The above-mentioned research by Daniel Goleman has shown that dual awareness helps process previously unprocessed psychological material.

My work with a client who watched the movie *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) will illustrate this process.

Review

Based on a true story, two parents struggle to find a cure for their son's apparently incurable, degenerative and terminal disease. The Odones have a five-year-old son, Lorenzo, who is diagnosed with adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD). The doctors say it is a rare disease that strikes only boys. Victims die after losing all sensory functions. All known treatments are experimental and none is rated as successful. No boy with ALD has ever survived. Though the parents enlist the boy in the most promising of the experimental treatment programs immediately following his diagnosis, the disease progresses rapidly and things look hopeless.

But despite the pessimistic prognosis from all the experts the parents refuse to give up. From their various discussions with the experts it is clear to them that one problem they face is the lack of a system for integrating knowledge about the disease. So they take it upon themselves to organize an international symposium of experts and parents of afflicted boys. The father combs the medical literature looking for clues. The mother stays at the son's side. Neither loses hope or faith, but the emotional strain takes its toll on their relationship. Eventually, they begin to connect various unrelated and overlooked theories, and despite resistance from a disbelieving medical world, they finally connect the right two ideas, discovering in the nick of time that the cure for ALD lies in olive oil.

Cinema Therapy

Tom, a client, was depressed because of chronic pain in his hips. He had gone from doctor to doctor, had seen chiropractors and acupuncturists. Nothing seemed to help. He felt so bad he didn't want to think about his situation any more. I noticed he had gained weight since I had last seen him. He told me he felt deflated and ready to give up.

*The movie *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) came to my mind. I encouraged Tom to watch it and explained to him the process of watching with conscious awareness.*

When I saw Tom again, he told me how surprised he was at what happened to him when he watched this movie while employing the

technique of conscious awareness. First he felt even worse when he sensed the parents' pain. He noticed a sinking feeling in his stomach. As I had advised him, he stayed aware of his physical sensations and even remembered to "breathe into" them (see exercise below). After a while these difficult feelings dissipated, and he noticed how he became more and more excited. He even got in touch with a deep inner knowing, like a hunch or an intuition that he should not give up yet but keep looking for ways to heal his hips. This made him feel less depressed and gave him new energy to make more calls to find a specialist who would be able to treat his ailment. It took a while, but eventually he found the right treatment. Tom feels much better now.

I had previously introduced Sue, another client, to the method of watching movies with conscious awareness, and one day she told me that watching the movie *Sliding Doors* (1998) in this way had a profound effect on her.

Review

The story begins with Londoner Helen being fired from her job in a public relations firm for 'borrowing' the last four bottles of beer. Shocked at her sudden dismissal, she makes her way back home via the Tube. In a metaphysical twist, Helen's life splits into two divergent paths, the outcome of the train's sliding doors. In one reality, Helen makes a last minute dash and manages to slip through these doors before they close, and in the other, the doors slide shut and she misses the train.

From this point on, the film distinguishes between the two possible paths of Helen's life. The one that catches the train (Helen A) returns home early to find her live-in writer boyfriend Gerry in bed with Lydia, an old flame. In a parallel reality, the one that missed the train (Helen B), gets mugged, goes to the hospital, and eventually arrives home to find Gerry looking as if he got a late start on his day, because Lydia had left already.

In an intricate cross-referencing braid the film continues, juxtaposing the changes arising from one insignificant event. Helen A moves in with her supportive best friend, dumps Gerry, and builds her own successful PR business. When her emotional pain eventually heals, she becomes enamored with James, a genuinely caring, witty, and talkative man. Meanwhile, Helen B's life is all downhill as she -- hopeless and depressed -- takes on two menial jobs in order to support herself and Gerry while he shams finishing his novel and instead continues his affair.

Even though Helen A has more of a 'fairy tale' experience compared to her less fortunate counterpart, her path is also uneven and tumultuous. For

example, a couple of misunderstandings between James and Helen challenge their relationship.

At the film's close, when Helen's divergent paths re-converge and another metaphysical twist leaves the viewer with a thought-provoking conclusion, Helen B, surprisingly, ends up being the luckier one.

Cinema Therapy

Sue told me that she gets into fights with her boyfriend every night when she comes home from work. She didn't think that this had anything to do with her and kept complaining about him.

When she watched the unhappy Helen in the movie, she experienced feelings of despair and a queasy sensation in her stomach. She also noted that those were familiar feelings, ones she experienced regularly at work and immediately following work. Instead of ignoring these feelings and sensations as she viewed the film, she stayed present to her discomfort and wondered why Helen's life affected her so much. Soon she was able to see that she also felt very unhappy about her work situation but had tried to ignore it. Her suppressed frustration had spilled into her relationship and led to fights with her boyfriend. At this point in our session Sue said she felt flooded with awe and gratitude about her understanding and a renewed love for her boyfriend. Following our session, they became closer, and she started to become more proactive in finding another job.

Guidelines for therapists to give to clients to introduce watching movies with conscious awareness

Choose a movie that seems that it might touch you or that did touch you when you saw it the first time. If you want to focus on a specific aspect of yourself or your life, find a film in the appropriate category in the film indices on www.cinematherapy.com.

A movie experience can be used for healing and growth even if you only use some of my suggestions or none at all. You might find your own way to watch with conscious awareness. Just allowing yourself to become absorbed in sections of the film or the entire movie and reflecting about your responses afterwards can be very beneficial.

You may benefit greatly by applying the following suggestions (Sinetar, 1993, pp. 131-135):

In preparation for each viewing session, sit comfortably. Let your attention move effortlessly, without strain, first to your body then to your breath. Follow your

breath in a watchful way for a while. Notice any tension or holding. To release tension you may experiment with "breathing into" any part of your body that feels strained.

Your gentle attention helps you to become more present. Experience yourself without inner criticizing or comment. If you notice yourself judging or thinking of things from the past or future, simply return to your experience in the present moment.

As soon as you are calm and centered, start watching the movie. Pay attention to the story *and* to yourself. Do not continue to create a particular state, such as relaxation but rather be a compassionate witness of what is. Observe especially how the movie's images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect your physical sensations. What happens when these throw you off balance because they trigger undesired emotions? Just put your attention on that experience while you are watching. In all likelihood, a film's stimulants are similar to whatever unbalances you in daily life.

Stay present and alert. Watch your responses with interested, curious detachment. Bring your inner attention to a holistic bodily awareness (a felt sense). This means you are aware of "all of you" — head, heart, belly, etc. Once in a while you might notice a certain sensation or emotional response from your subtle, always-present intuitive core. After a while you might let yourself get totally absorbed by the movie for a while and forget about anything else. Notice your sensations when you come back to awareness of yourself. Another entryway into conscious awareness is to observe how the movie images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect your breath. Notice its shallowness or fullness; its speed and quality. Do not try to change or control it. Do not analyze anything while you are watching. Be fully present with your experience.

If, at any point during this process, you start feeling annoyed with the "split awareness" of the movie and yourself, just let yourself focus on the film alone and forget about everything else. Most likely you will find the experience beneficial anyway.

If you experience emotions that you find uncomfortable, first try to identify the physical sensation associated with this emotion (such as a knot in your stomach if you feel anxiety, etc.) and try to "breathe into" the physical sensation. This might seem strange if the sensation is a tension in your shoulder for example. It is still possible though to "breathe into" a pain in your shoulder. Just imagine your breath flowing from your lungs into your shoulder. Although it is just an image, the mind/body works in mysterious ways. In most cases you will notice that your difficult emotion soon dissolves. This practice will prepare you for coping with similar feelings in real life.

There are possible exceptions to what I just said. A movie or movie scene might remind you of an emotionally traumatic experience and trigger intense emotions that seem too overwhelming or depressing. Trying to be more aware of these emotions might feel unbearable because it takes you out of a state of protective denial. In this case be gentle with yourself and make sure to take care of yourself. If you sense that continuing to watch the movie might re-traumatize you, leave the theater or turn off the television. I suggest that you talk to a professional psychotherapist about your experience. Do not continue with the exercise.

For everyone else, after watching the movie, reflect on the following questions. (It is helpful to write down your answers):

1. Do you remember your feelings and sensations, or whether your breathing changed throughout the movie? In all likelihood, what affects you in the film is similar to whatever influences you in your daily life.
2. Notice what you liked and what you did not like or even hated about the movie. Which characters or actions seemed especially attractive or unattractive to you?
3. Did you identify with one or several characters?
4. Were there one or several characters in the movie that modeled behavior that you would like to emulate? Did they develop certain strengths or other capacities that you would like to develop as well?
5. Notice whether any aspect of the film was especially hard to watch. Could this be related to something that you might have repressed?
6. Did you experience something that connected or reconnected you with certain values, virtues, capacities, inner wisdom, or your higher self as you watched the film or immediately after?
7. Did anything in this movie touch you? The fact that a character or a scene moved you might indicate that your subconscious mind is revealing information that might guide you toward healing and wholeness. Dreams have the same capacity. What might this guiding "message" be?

As you examine your reaction to the film, try to avoid focusing on the artistic merits of the movie or even the story. Usually when we discuss films, it is with respect to their entertainment value; the most prevalent example of film analyses are those written or told to us by professional film critics, but their focus is usually on the film and the filmmakers. It is you, the film viewer, who should remain at the center of attention.

If some of the guidelines in the exercise turn out to be useful, you might consider adapting them to scenes in your real life after you have practiced in "reel" life. These guidelines are intended to help you become a better observer. As observing helps you to step back, the bigger picture becomes more obvious. Such practice will help you learn to understand yourself and others more deeply

in the big “movie” of your life and to see yourself and the world more objectively.

Doubling Voices

Since the dawn of the movie era more than one hundred years ago, cinema has had its skeptics and detractors. Even Louis Lumière, one of the principal inventors of cinematography, said, “The cinema is an invention without a future.” (Gabbard, 2001) But Lumière was wrong. Movies have become enormously popular and immensely powerful as a tool for telling stories, communicating information, and influencing culture. Even the early silent films, with their jerky, grainy, black and white images exhibited an almost magical power to captivate their viewers’ attention. Today, with bone shaking surround-sound, brilliant color, wide-screen format, and digital special effects, the power of cinema to transport us into other worlds has grown to gargantuan proportions.

As one measure of just how powerful movies have become, consider how some sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and clerics complain that movies are changing the way society, especially children, view themselves and their world. Such critics point out that in an effort to appeal to the basest elements of human nature, many movies overemphasize graphic violence and sex. Of course, their complaint is about the films’ *content* — not the medium. But it is interesting to note that while such critics level these same complaints against other media — books, magazines, popular music, fine art — movies bear the lion’s share of such attacks. It is illuminating to ask why. I believe it is because movies, by virtue of their verisimilitude and ubiquity, have significantly greater power than other media to move us, to change the way we see our world and ourselves.

It is obvious that many films play to the lowest common denominators — the base human instincts and desires. Even so, it is practically impossible to number the movies that seek the opposite pole, that strive to inspire the highest human values. The vast majority of movies simply hope to entertain by spinning a good yarn, and even those sometimes end up unintentionally serving as a catalyst for personal insight into the darker side of the soul. When those dark aspects are brought into the light of conscious awareness, true inner freedom is possible. Like no other medium before it, the popular movie presents the potential of a new power for illuminating the depth of human experience.

I most frequently hear the following arguments against the use of movies in therapy:

-> Cinema Therapy is an unscientific tool with little research to account for therapeutic value

I recommend that in therapy, movies be used in combination with an accepted traditional therapeutic modality, like depth psychotherapy, parts work, cognitive therapy, EMDR, hypnotherapy, Narrative Therapy, couples, family, and group therapy techniques, etc. Cinema Therapy is meant to be a supportive, adjunct tool for these therapeutic approaches. Therefore its therapeutic value depends on the therapeutic efficiency of these other modalities.

➤Cinema Therapy is too simplistic; one cannot treat serious psychological problems just by letting clients watch movies

I believe that this presentation will demonstrate how complex the use of film in therapy is. And again, cinema therapy is only an adjunct tool. If the main modality within which it is used helps treat serious problems, the use of films can only increase this effect. I will show you why and how today.

➤Most movies are bad in quality and bad for the psyche, especially the violent or depressing ones

First of all, I believe that many movies have been made that are inspirational and useful for cinema therapy. Whether a movie is seen as good or bad is mostly a matter of taste, like most artistic expressions. Whether a film touches the viewer is much more important for its therapeutic value than its artistic excellence. For us it is also important to choose an appropriate movie for a specific treatment goal. What about the fact that the media talks a lot about the negative effect that TV and movies have on viewers? How can watching commercial movies be good for anyone?

Yes, movies can have a powerful effect on our psyche. Like the proverbial hammer, which can be used to harm or to serve us, movies can be damaging or they can be used to our advantage. Therefore it is important to choose the appropriate films and follow the guidelines that I suggest.

Through movies that show undesired behavior we can learn how to not behave. We see the negative consequences of a character's action and learn "by proxy" (Solomon, 2001, p. 10). These films can serve us as cautionary tales. For example, if somebody struggles with an addiction, a movie like *28 Days* (2000) can be a wakeup call. Gary Solomon says: "You can see denial far more clearly when it is acted out in a movie than when you read about it in a book or if a therapist tries to explain it to you. Once you see what denial really looks like by

observing an actor or actress playing a role, you can get in touch with your own denial” (Solomon, 1995, p. 16).

But most frequently, the question about the negative effects of films comes up around violent movies. Some claim that violent movies have a cleansing effect of the release of intense, stored emotion. They are cathartic and discharge pent-up aggressive feelings in a harmless way. Other research found that violent movies make already aggressive viewers even more aggressive. I have observed that both can be true depending on the personality of the viewer. Violent films can be re-traumatizing if they reactivate previous psychological trauma. Therefore therapists have to be careful when violence is part of a chosen film. Many movies might need to be excluded from use in therapy for most clients. I have a client though who has violent trauma in her background and finds a sense of resolution and healing when the bad guys in violent movies get beaten up at the end.

In general I would like to consider the following: Contemplating certain movies that trigger fear, anger or sadness in therapy might help clients become more conscious of these emotions, if they have been repressed. In work with psychological trauma, some treatment methods help clients to process trauma within a so-called “therapeutic window”. Interventions are done within this “window”, when they create enough therapeutic challenge but don't lead to an overwhelming internal experience. Emotional overwhelm needs to be avoided because it can create an avoidance response, like dissociation, etc.

Therefore, certain films, even those with some violent elements - used carefully and creatively - can help clients get in touch with unresolved trauma and therefore serve as an intervention that provides sufficient therapeutic challenge to enter the “therapeutic window”.

For example, I have used *Affliction* (1997), a movie about alcoholism, childhood abuse, and the serious consequences on the life of the survivors of this kind of trauma. After watching this film, a client of mine was able to acknowledge the impact of his fathers alcoholism and physical abuse on his emotional development for the first time. The movie, in combination with client-centered therapeutic work, helped him to break through his denial safely, and he started working on his recovery. With another client I began using EMDR after the movie brought up memories of abuse.

A client told me that being confronted with intimidating situations through the movie helped her contemplate solutions for similar situations in her own life and prepare her to deal with these, as they came up later.

Films that some people might consider depressive should be used carefully too. For example the new movie *The Hours* (2003) is very intense in terms of dealing with issues of depression and suicide. In this film some characters choose "life

over death", and in that sense there is an element of hope. Others end up committing suicide. The depth of despair and depression that the main characters face is extremely potent and it is possible that this film could, perhaps, reinforce the negative beliefs of a seriously depressed or even suicidal person.

On the other hand, I have noticed that depressive films, which usually portrait depressed characters, can - almost like support groups - help clients feel less alone and isolated with their experience. Depressive films can help normalize depression, especially if it results from grief, or serve as a psycho-educational tool in cognitive work with depression.

A thorough assessment is required before assigning this kind of film. In order to assess correctly, clients should be asked how they responded to certain depressive movies before.

➤ Most people want to be entertained by films instead of analyzing them for therapeutic purposes; they don't want to spoil their fun of watching movies.

I don't ask a client to analyze a movie but to watch them with conscious awareness, as I will demonstrate soon. Besides, people who seek therapy are usually receptive to therapeutic interventions. Watching a movie is considered one of the more pleasurable ones.

We usually remember our experiences better when we have them under two distinct circumstances: Pain and pleasure. We also learn well when we are relaxed. Since entertainment can create pleasure and relaxation, a movie with high entertainment value can have a high therapeutic value, if it conveys therapeutically relevant messages.

When clients and group members are afraid that their fun with movies will be spoiled for ever once we start using them for therapeutic purposes, I usually tell them the following: It's not only OK but very good to be entertained by a film. Enjoying a movie might give you a little vacation from your troubles and help you approach a solution with less emotional involvement and a fresh and creative perspective. Conscious awareness does not need to interfere with this. The goal of cinema therapy is to help you be both entertained and conscious. Like in real life, your conscious awareness will increase and decrease at times. Learning to have control over this will benefit you greatly in life. In real life it is often even harder not to get "caught up" in things and "run on automatic". Sometimes we become conscious only later when we look back. Most psychotherapeutic and spiritual orientations (Buddhism talks about "mindfulness") teach us to become more aware about ourselves. Learning more conscious awareness while watching movies can create a bridge to more awareness and therefore more control over your real life.

Therapeutic Environments

These are some of the areas in which Cinema Therapy has been found most useful:

- Individual therapy session
- Couples/family therapy session
- Group therapy
- School counseling

Ways Films Aid the Therapeutic Process

Supporting process of diagnosis and assessment

In addition to questions regarding family history, presenting problem, lifestyle, overall goals and objectives, I sometimes ask a client to name a few films they have found to be personally meaningful. I may ask what kind of films they prefer and which characters have had a personal impact. Then I might ask how their own attitudes and behavior are mirrored by the characters in these movies. Learning about the clients' identifications and projections in this way can be a very helpful tool to understanding their psyche early. Many clients reveal more about themselves this way than when they are asked more directly.

John and Jan Hesley emphasize in *Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning*: "... in client's choice of movies, we find clues to their working role models ... ideal self-images, internal resources, potential goals, perceived obstacles, degrees of imagination and creativity, and overall philosophy in life. Furthermore ... by talking about films early in the therapeutic relationship, we allow clients to express feelings that may be too threatening to express directly. ... It also helps determine if using movies in therapy will be productive and, if they do, which type will work best" (Hesley & Hesley, 2001, p. 41).

It usually doesn't matter whether the therapist has not seen the movies the client describes at this point in the therapeutic process. I noticed that sometimes being unfamiliar with a film can be an advantage because I am forced to see the movie through the clients' eyes, like their dreams. When the clients see themselves as experts in knowing certain movies, greater rapport is possible and there is an increased likelihood for more independence in the relationship.

Helping to overcome resistance

Milton Erickson was able to circumvent resistance in clients by telling stories. (Erickson & Rossi, 1980) Using movies can do the same.

Resistance dissolves because

1. Clients become curious, when I suggest that they watch a movie, especially if they don't expect this kind of intervention.
2. Rapport develops faster and stronger because movies speak a language they are familiar with; this is less intimidating than psychological terms.

3. Watching a movie with subsequent discussion helps them to see their situation from a bird eye's perspective. Resistance often results from a feeling of helplessness. Many movies demonstrate behavior change and clients start to envision how their own problems might be solved.

Eliciting Emotions

This aspect is particularly important for clients who tend to intellectualize or otherwise suppress their emotions. By triggering emotions, movies can open doors that otherwise might stay closed. For many people, it is safer and therefore easier to let go of their defenses when feelings arise while watching a movie than when they arise in "real life" with "real people". They experience emotions that they are often not in touch with through identification with certain characters and their predicaments.

Scary films can make viewers feel alive, "on the edge of their seats". They are fully present with their experience like during scary moments while mountain climbing or skiing. I encourage clients to be consciously aware of these emotional responses while they watch the movie. Talking about these feelings afterwards in session helps to integrate the experience and therefore expand the tolerance for a bigger range of emotions. When clients tell me that they felt more alive, being fully present with watching an exciting or scary scene, I help them discover the possibilities to access aliveness and presence in their life.

As described above (The Cathartic Way), humorous movies can decrease depression symptoms and increase pain thresholds, while tragic films can trigger crying for catharsis.

Identifying and Reinforcing Inner Strength

- Remembering internal resources

Many clients struggle with low self-esteem. They are not aware of their assets and the means by which they can access them. These clients need guidance to recall forgotten and discounted resources and to become aware again of opportunities for those resources to be applied. I encourage clients to find out how the film characters find solutions to their problems and help them recognize which of the character's skills are familiar and accessible to them. If I notice that they discount the skills and strengths that they have in common with the movie characters, I might point this out. I know that a shift in my clients' perspective has happened when they acknowledge and appropriate resources from their own repertoire.

- Gaining hope and encouragement

Many movies begin in despair and end in triumph. If clients can identify with characters trapped in their circumstances, and share their disappointments as well as unsteady steps toward liberation, they often find reason for optimism in

their own situation. In our therapeutic work, it helps them to get in touch with the courage to do what is necessary to change their situation.

- Validation

By watching the film characters who go through similar experiences clients can develop compassion with their own predicament this way and feel less isolated. This often helps them gain new strength.

Reinforcing an Idea Introduced in Therapy

- Reframing problems

Bandler and Grinder said: "The meaning that any event has depends upon the 'frame' in which we perceive it. ... When the meaning changes, the person's responses and behaviors also change." (Bandler, & Grinder, 1975, p. 76)

Films, because they often reframe fictional crisis, are ideal vehicles for reframing the problems of clients and for causing clients to entertain productive doubts about their own crisis. What seems to be true at the beginning of a film is soon cast into doubt and by the end is cast into an entirely different context.

For example, some clients describe their families as irreparably flawed and believe that their situation is hopeless. The movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1994), illustrates a different attitude. Members of the Grape family have serious emotional and physical problems: mental retardation, major depression, codependency, and a severe eating disorder. But this troubled family sticks together and thrives. The film shows how one family refuses to accept stereotyped definitions of itself and therefore find novel solutions. (Hesley & Hesley, 2001)

As therapists, we can use this kind of film to demonstrate that even in the most trying circumstances; people can still act forcibly to improve their lives. By extension, a client's troubled family can be reframed into a setting in which personal growth can take place.

Reframes don't make change less necessary, but they help change occur in a friendlier atmosphere and therefore make it more likely to occur.

Healthy reframe is not the same as denial. The difference between these two might need to be discussed in session.

- Providing therapeutic metaphors

Metaphors in films help the client go beyond the conscious material and address the affective realm of the psyche. In this way they add to the impact of

cognitive insights. "Because films galvanize feelings, they increase the probability that clients will carry out new and desired behaviors. Cognitive insights tell clients what to do, but affective insights give them the motivation to follow through" (Hesley & Hesley, 2001, p. 22).

Film Experience with Individual Clients in Different Therapeutic Approaches

Depth Psychotherapy and the Movie Experience

Viewing Films as Doorways to the Unconscious

- The unconscious communicates its content in symbols.
- We can become aware of this "communication" through dreams and active imagination, which are "windows" to the unconscious: both convert the invisible forms of the unconscious into images that are perceptible to the conscious mind.
- Another "window" can be the emotional response to a movie scene or character

Therefore depth psychologists can use responses to movies, as they use responses to dreams or active imagination.

- Such a response often indicates that a pathway to the unconscious is activated.

Therapeutic Reasoning for Working with the Unconscious

- Our unconscious is often in conflict with our conscious ideas, intentions and goals.
- Inquiring into the symbolism and the effect of a movie can break down the barriers between the two levels of the psyche and set up a genuine flow of communication between them; unconscious material can start to become more conscious

This helps to resolve some of our neurotic conflicts with the unconscious, and thus learn more about who we really are as authentic human beings.

Cognitive Therapy and the Movie Experience

- Support in understanding the cognitive model

The cognitive model says the following: A situation is a situation. It's how a person thinks about or interprets the situation that determines how he or she

feels. Therapists teach the cognitive model to give clients a framework and give them some sense of control over their emotional reactions.

Movies can be a very useful aid in this teaching process. I noticed that clients easily come up with interpretations of what they see on the screen. For example, if a character seems depressed, I would ask the client what negative beliefs this character might hold about him or herself. Clients usually come up with an answer right away, even if it was hard for them to make the same connection for themselves.

➤ Identifying cognitive distortions and schemas

I usually give clients the list of negative distortions (David Burns) and ask them which ones possibly apply for the film character. They usually enjoy this process because they experience it like a game. After that, when I turn their attention to their own process and ask about their cognitive distortions, they feel less alone with their experience and less judgmental about themselves. Since depressed clients usually hold cognitive distortions and tend to be self-loathing, it often helps that the work with movies introduces some lightness.

Morty Lefkoe's Decision Maker Process

Morty Lefkoe's *Decision Maker Process* (Lefkoe, 1997) is based on a combination of psychodynamic and cognitive work. It lends itself very well to the integration of the movie experience in the following way:

Our beliefs can help us or they can mislead us. I explain to clients that our beliefs are usually formed in childhood, as an adaptive response to our reality at that time. Later in life, these beliefs about ourselves and about people are often not accurate reflections of the current reality. In other words, they are cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions can prevent us from developing healthy self-esteem and realizing our goals in life. I teach my clients that what they take to be real is, in fact, a highly edited, thoroughly filtered version of reality. I encourage them to think of it as their personal *myth of reality*.

The following metaphor is useful in helping clients understand how questioning their perceptions can lead to growth and healing. Our eyes and ears can be likened to a camera and microphone, through which we see and hear the world (McKay & Fanning, 2000, pp. 152-158). Instead of actually witnessing reality directly, we watch what I call an *inner movie*, on a screen inside our heads. And this screen, it turns out, is often unreliable.

Our inner movie plays the story that we tell ourselves about the world around us and about who we are. The "plot" of our inner movie often tells a story about the world and ourselves that is based on early life experiences. Several factors can determine what shows up on our screen: Habits and coping mechanisms, emotional states, previous emotionally traumatic experiences, personal philosophies, prejudices, values, etc.

Not only are our inner movies impacted by these mental, physical, and emotional factors, but our inner movies themselves, in turn, affect our perception of ourselves, the world and, subsequently, our behavior. Undesired inner movies can produce a chain reaction:

Undesired inner movie => negative belief => undesired feeling => undesired behavior => further undesired feelings, and so on.

Cinema Therapy

My client, Thelma, was frequently criticized by her father when she was young. This created a psychological imprint that I call her *undesired inner movie*. Projecting this childhood “movie” on today’s reality, she struggled with the conviction that there was something wrong with her, that she was not good enough and that therefore she did not have a right to speak up and express her needs—*negative belief*. Thelma often felt depressed and anxious—*undesired feelings*.

Because Thelma believed that expressing her desires could potentially lead to conflict, she often kept quiet and complied whenever a conflict arose—*undesired behavior*. As a result of her undesired behavior, Thelma then felt resentful toward any person to whom she surrendered, especially her husband, and did not even know why—*more undesired feelings*.

Like many of my clients, Thelma loved movies. So she was very open to movie metaphors and excited about my suggestion to view a film. I used her movie experience in conjunction with a cognitive approach and reflections about her childhood influences. Morty Lefkoe’s *Decision Maker Process* offers a concise and well-structured technique, from which I drew the following four-step intervention:

Step 1: Identifying an “Old Home Movie”

I asked Thelma to close her eyes and said: “In your mind’s eye, imagine sitting in front of your television at home and watching a film on a video. You are watching an old home movie, a scene that shows your father criticizing you.”

Step 2: Examining the “Old Home Movie”

When she saw the “scene” I continued: “Now imagine that you take your remote control and rewind your old home movie and play it again. This time, look specifically at the events that led to your negative belief. Try to watch as an objective observer. Is it possible there could be a second interpretation? Perhaps, instead of the cause being ‘There’s something wrong with me,’ is it possible that your father’s behavior might have a number of different meanings, each as valid as your original interpretation? For example My father thought that being critical would motivate me to excel’ or ‘My father had inadequate parenting skills,’ ... (I mentioned several others.)

After Thelma opened her eyes she understood that each of these meanings was as valid as the one she had chosen as a child. This intervention opened a door to a different story about herself and her father, and thus a different inner movie.

Step 3: Playing a Different Inner Movie

Now I asked Thelma to select a movie from a list that I provided: *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *The Full Monty* (1997), *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Places in the Heart* (1984), and *Where the Heart Is* (2000)). In these films one or several characters achieve the self-respect and self-acceptance that I wanted Thelma to internalize. I also gave Thelma David Burn's list of cognitive distortions (Burns, 1999, p. 296). She chose to watch *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* at home. I asked Thelma to notice which kind of cognitive distortion the main character, Toula, displays in the early part of the film, whether Thelma recognizes her own struggle with similar distortions and how Toula changed.

Review:

Toula Portokalos arrives at work with her father, who tells his daughter how old she appears. Toula appears accustomed to this negativity and feels badly about herself. She is a waitress at a Greek restaurant, owned by her family. We learn that Toula has not married, and this is the talk of the town. She allows herself to be walked on by her family and friends who make most of her choices. Her family promotes three traditional values — marry a Greek boy, have Greek babies, and feed everyone until you die. From an early age, she is distressed by their “over-the-top” ways. Her strict father does not believe a woman should be smart. Most members of her family, excepting her father, believes she is capable of doing more with her life. Toula looks dreary and old for her age. One day at work she sees Ian whom she finds attractive. She hides behind the counter to peer at him.

This is a turning point for Toula. When she begins taking classes at a local college, her confidence improves, she puts on a little makeup, and is transformed into a beautiful person oozing happiness. She becomes a successful travel agent. She reinvents herself, creates a new appearance, and gains self-esteem in the process. As she overcomes her insecurities, she bucks tradition and becomes engaged to Ian, who is not Greek, and eventually wins the family over to him and their wedding plans.

Since this movie is a comedy and not a character study, it is up to us to imagine where Toula's newfound self-image came from, and what were her resources for her transformation. This is an invitation to fill in the holes with our imagination and look inward at the same time, finding our own resources.

The movie did its “magic.” By watching Toulou’s transformation, Thelma “copied” the character’s healing experience into her own inner movie screen and at the same time “erased” her old, undesired inner film. The newly superimposed wholesome movie started a healthy chain reaction and helped break the negative one:

Wholesome inner movie => healthy beliefs => desired feelings.

Step 4: Recording the Healthy Belief

I instructed Thelma to write her new, healthy belief on several pieces of paper or cards, and to place these notes at prominent places in her house so that she could see them frequently throughout the day. This way the new “copy” of Thelma’s healthier inner movie could sink more deeply into her unconscious.

Within a few weeks Thelma developed a positive self-image that led to increased autonomy in her relationships and success at work.

The lessons many clients gain from motion pictures can deepen and strengthen their efforts to change themselves. Because movies speak directly to the heart and spirit, they bypass the resistance we put up in our conscious mind. Many clients intuitively understand the meaning that is inherent in the story of a film.

Behavior Modification Therapy and the Movie Experience

➤ Assertiveness Training

❖ Overt Modeling

Overt modeling techniques have been used to train assertion skills. First, clients are shown examples of appropriate assertive behavior. Then they are asked to imitate the behavior, called behavioral rehearsal.

Showing movies or movie clips can very well serve as an example.

❖ Covert Modeling

Covert modeling requires the person to imagine making assertive responses. The therapist provides suggestions about what to include in the scene.

This imagination can draw from characters in films the client has seen.

➤ Exposure Methods

❖ preparing Systematic Desensitization

Systematic desensitization is based on counter-conditioning, and involves the attempt to replace the fear response to phobic stimuli with a new response that is incompatible with fear. Clients are initially given relaxation training.

Movie images such as a safe place or an inner guide can support the relaxation.

❖ preparing Flooding and Implosion

Flooding and implosion are anxiety-induction therapies for phobias in order to extinguish the phobic response. During Flooding the client is exposed to the feared object without chance of escape or avoidance. Implosive therapy requires the client to imagine unrealistic, exaggerated, or unlikely harmful events that are associated with the phobic reaction.

Since anxiety is encouraged during these treatments, the clients need to access inner courage and strength. Remembering and identifying with movie characters who model strength in the face of adversity can be very helpful in this work.

❖ preparing Exposure with Response Prevention

The predominantly and most successfully used treatment modality of OCD is Exposure with Response Prevention. Clients are exposed to a particular feared situation, the triggers of the obsessions or compulsive rituals, such as sources of contamination. They fully interact with the fearful stimuli, like touching doorknobs, the floor, toilet seats. At this point the clients feel their fear arising. Response prevention means that they must block any rituals used to prevent the harm that they anticipate as a consequence of the exposure, such as hand washing. They agree to tolerate the discomfort associated with not performing the ritual until they are habituated to the stimulus.

To help tolerate the fear, accessing inner courage and strength through identification with film situations is very helpful.

❖ Preparing Aversion Therapy and Covert Sensitization

The same strength building support through movies applies to this method.

Both aversion therapy and covert sensitization teach clients to associate negative consequences with a stimulus, like smoking or drinking for example. During covert sensitization, clients only imagine behaviors associated with particular consequences while they experience them in aversion therapy.

Hypnotherapy and the Movie Experience

Similarities to Cinema Therapy:

- Watching a movie often is a trance experience (focused concentration)
- Through metaphors, messages in films address the unconscious and bypass the conscious mind

Cinema Therapy tools combined with Hypnotherapy or Imagery Work:

- “Film Re-entry” (similar to “Dream Re-entry”)

In trance, clients enter the story of a movie in a certain scene as a specific character, or in relation to a character that is important to them. Then the clients let their own story unfold with the guidance of the therapist. Frequently, unconscious material gets revealed.

- “Skill Mastery” - Attributes of film character

In trance, clients are guided to “become” a character who modeled desired behaviors and skills. This is a way to help them acquire the film character's attributes.

- Calming film scene to create a safe place

As a tool of deepening trance, hypnotherapists often guide clients to a safe place of their choice. Many peaceful movie scenes can serve well in this process. Clients “step” into their safe place by “stepping” into the movie screen, on which the calming, safe place appears.

- Characters as inner parts like Inner Guide or Critic

This is basically parts work in trance.

Parts Work and the Movie Experience

Besides in imagery or hypnotherapy work that addresses parts of the psyche, movie characters with their distinct personalities and behaviors can also become placeholders for parts in other kinds of therapy such as empty chair, Gestalt, Ego States work, Psychosynthesis, Voice Dialog, etc.

Attributing film characters to inner parts helps these therapies.

- Identify and distinguish parts
(One of my clients, for example, calls her inner guide or Higher Self “Inner Yoda”, who is a character from *Star Wars*, because she appreciated him for his wisdom.)

- Understand their relationship to each other
- Adopt an attitude of respectful attention to parts
- Accept disowned parts
- Reassign new roles to parts
- Mediate between parts and resolve conflicts

In one case I used parts work with the movie *Sliding Doors* (1998), which was reviewed earlier on in the paper.

Cinema Therapy

My client, Sally, responded especially to one sequence of this film. She arrived at one of our sessions confused and worried. The previous night she had yelled at her husband Jim, which led to a big fight. My client felt bad because she saw that the small mistake he had made when they cooked dinner didn't justify her acting out in this way. Now Sally understood that the real reason for her reaction was her hurt about his plans to leave for a fishing trip with friends. This made her feel excluded and abandoned.

As we explored her reaction, Sally came to understand that her anger was a way for her to push him away while defending against her vulnerability and fear of abandonment. She sensed that it would help both of them if she apologized, but was afraid that this would make her look stupid and needy. She told me: "Jim might take advantage of my vulnerability, criticize me, and push me away. Then I would feel even worse."

*As we worked with her concern, Sally started to suspect that her beliefs might be based on a father projection. But a significant shift didn't happen until I suggested that she viewed *Sliding Doors*. I asked her to focus specifically on two scenes. In the first scene her fear of rejection keeps Helen (A) from calling James after a separation that was based on a misunderstanding. In the subsequent scene she displays a combination of strength and vulnerability when she runs into him on the street. Now Helen expresses her interest in James even though she is nervous and not sure whether he is still interested in her.*

When Sally came back for her next session, she told me that she felt inspired by the movie. I suggested parts work with chairs, while using the character Helen. I asked my client to sit in chair one and sense Helen's fear and vulnerability as it was displayed in the first scene -- the vulnerable-and-afraid-Helen-chair. This way Sally's vulnerability received a voice through her identification with the character. When I asked my client whether this was a familiar experience and invited her to speak from this inner place, she uncovered the deeper source of these feelings.

There was, in fact, a connection to her father, who had frequently told her that she should stop crying, otherwise he would give her a reason to cry. After she seemed to have reached sufficient clarity about this object relation, I asked Sally to change to chair number two -- the courageous-and-strong-vulnerable-Helen-chair. Now my client "became" the Helen that she had seen in the second scene. Sally was able to sense Helen's courage to face her fear. When I asked her about her physical sensations, she discovered a solid, strong quality in her belly. I pointed out that, although she was sitting in "Helen's chair", she felt her own strength. Once she owned this experience, I asked Sally to imagine apologizing to her husband. Immediately her vulnerability arose again, but she did not push it away. For the first time, my client experienced a strength that allowed her to tolerate her vulnerability.

Consequently her perception of Jim changed as well. Sally was able to understand more clearly how she had projected her father on him. Remembering now how good-hearted her husband actually is, she realized that they will have an opportunity to experience more emotional intimacy, when she expresses the truth about the hurt she had felt beneath her anger and apologizes for her yelling.

In times of emotional stress, clients are usually not in touch with their strength and courage and the means by which they can access them. Through parts work, by identifying with different characters or different aspects of one character, clients can recognize that these qualities are latent and available to them, as Sally's case demonstrated. I believe that, without the aid of the movie experience, it would have been much harder for my client to recognize these capacities in herself.

Guidelines for therapists

Questions and statements can be useful during parts work:

1. What movie character(s) or different aspects of one character do you identify with?
2. Let yourself "be" one character or aspect.
3. What do you sense in your body?
4. Do you experience a part of yourself sometimes this way?
5. What function does this part have in your life? How does it serve or hinder you?
6. Repeat these steps with different parts
7. When working with a part that represents a desired quality: How do you feel emotionally and physically when you sense this inner resource? Picture your life as you live this quality more fully.

EMDR and the Movie Experience

- Resource development and installation:

What was said about the use of movie scenes and characters in hypnotherapy applies in a very similar way for the resource installation during the preparation phase in EMDR. The only difference is that EMDR therapists don't use formal trance induction.

With EMDR, clients go through an abreaction in trauma work, which often is emotionally very demanding. Therefore, strengthening resources, such as a safe place, inner guide, etc., are first installed. Clients feel safer this way because they know that these resources are available if they start feeling overwhelmed.

- Positive Psychology EMDR

During Peak Performance EMDR or other kind of positive psychology EMDR, the installation of an inner coach drawn from movie characters can be very useful.

- ❖ Calming film scenes to create a safe place
- ❖ Healthy or inspirational film character as inner coach or advisor
- ❖ Film characters as inner team of support people
- ❖ Identification with film character's success

Narrative Therapy and the Movie Experience

Narrative Therapy is based on the assumption that, as people make sense of their day-to-day lives, they construct their lives into narrative form - stories. They arrange their experiences into patterns and sequences that make sense of themselves and their lives, called dominant narrative. This perception can be distorted and dysfunctional, as much of the client's strength remains unrecognized. Through narrative therapy clients reshape their perception of self, their relationships and their life by re-constructing their narratives. One main tool in this work is to help clients find experiences that they dismissed before, because they didn't fit into their dominant view of themselves: a "unique outcome". These exceptional experiences reconnect clients to their forgotten resources.

Similarities to Cinema Therapy:

- Interest in the storied nature of human experience
- Interest in stories as communicators of meaning
- Use of metaphors to stimulate insight

Cinema Therapy tools combined with Narrative Therapy:

- Movie experience supports understanding of own life as a narrative
- Diagnostic tool (client: "I see myself life like character ...")
- Films support giving meaning to "unique outcome"

Certain film scenes and the strength or courage of characters can remind clients of their own forgotten resources, in narrative terms their “unique outcome”.

Couples and Family Therapy and the Movie Experience

Systems-oriented therapy and communication training in combination with watching films that show family dynamics helps clients

- to understand their problem as a function of being part of a larger system,
- to identify by comparison how they had or had not satisfactorily adjusted in their system,
- to retrieve or learn necessary attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, etc.
- to communicate unfamiliar concepts to their partners through films that introduce readily grasped images,
- and to meaningfully connect or reconnect through improved communication.

When one family member resists therapy, encouraging them to watch a movie where a character struggles with similar issues often helps the resisting client to open up because they are less intimidated by the therapeutic process and less afraid of getting blamed.

The following work with the movie *Bend it like Beckham* (2003) demonstrates how a movie can be used in family work when only one member or the family is present in session:

Review

This movie tells the story of high-school senior Jesminder. Her Indian parents emigrated from Africa to England, where her dad works at Heathrow airport. They live in the middle-class suburb of Hounslow, under the flight path of arriving jets.

The British-born Jess is about to enter college and is encouraged by her strict parents to emulate her soon-to-be-married older sister Pinky. Jess is a fairly typical teenager. Her source of rebellion is to play soccer. In her family's living room is a large portrait of a Sikh spiritual leader, but above Jess' bed is her own inspiration--the British soccer superstar David Beckham. To Beckham's portrait she confides her innermost dream, which is to play for England.

However, although her parents tolerated her sports passion when she was younger, they now believe she should become serious about her life and prepare for the future. That means giving up "children's games" for cooking lessons, marriage, and university studies. They forbid her from playing any more. An Indian girl should not play soccer, since the game

consists of "displaying your bare legs to complete strangers." The preparations for her sister's wedding only underscore the liabilities of Jess's unladylike behavior. Her mother says: "Who'd want a girl who plays football all day but can't make chapattis?" "Anyone can cook aloo gobi," Jess responds, "but who can bend a ball like Beckham?"

The edict to stop playing soccer comes just as Jess has taken up an invitation from a white classmate, Juliette, to try out for an all-girls' soccer team. The coach, a young Irishman named Joe, thinks she's brilliant and offers Jess the opportunity to play for a semi-pro team. Her parents are appalled. The promise of an upcoming visit from an American soccer scout, and the potential to play professionally, keeps Jess sneaking back to the field for more soccer.

In the locker room, Jess finds herself schooling the white girls on what it means to be her: "Indian girls aren't supposed to play football," she explains. "That's a bit backwards," observes one of her teammates. Jess knows exactly what it is: "It's just culture, that's all."

Jess and Jules develop a friendship, through which the film explores the differences in their respective backgrounds and the ways they navigate their parents' rather typical fears -- of other cultures and changing times.

Jess's father regrets that he gave in to social demands when the British in Africa laughed at his regular use of a turban and refused to allow him to enter into their cricket competitions. Rather than use his resentment to fight for his daughter, he tries to pass on his disillusionment. But "things are different now," Jess tells him, and eventually he sneaks into the crowd at a match to see for himself.

Several crises emerge when Jess and Jules both fall for their soccer coach. When Pinky's future in-laws spot Jess and Jules on a street corner, displaying more affection publicly than is seemly, the wedding is called off. Jules' mom fears that Jules is a lesbian, and Jess' parents (believing short-haired Jules is male), think Jess is intimate with a white boy. After these issues get cleared up, new complications develop when the date chosen for Pinky's wedding is the very day that Jess is scheduled to play in the most important match of the season.

All of these conflicts come to a head in a colorful finale that crosscuts between a final football match and the traditional wedding. Jess and Jules take their team to victory against all odds. The cultures continue to clash, but in ways that are increasingly responsive to one another.

Cinema Therapy

My 30-year old client, Rashmi, came to therapy for help with her confusion around professional and relationship goals. She saw herself as bi-sexual. Rashmi felt unhappy in her current relationship with a woman. She also felt stuck at work, although she was very successful and well regarded at her workplace.

Rashmi's parents had immigrated into the US from India right before she was born. My client emphasized that she feels very loyal to her traditional family. Rashmi contemplated whether she might not be able to emotionally open up to her girlfriend because her parents would not approve of this relationship if they knew about it. She wanted to leave her job and start graduate school at a university on the East Coast. Although her parents were supportive toward her career ambitions in general, Rashmi believed that they did not approve of her plans to move far away from her family. It saddened her that she has to hide major aspects of her life from them. Rashmi even wondered whether an arranged marriage would bring her happiness and the closeness to her family she was yearning for.

My client also told me that she had not openly rebelled as a teenager. After seeing Bend it like Beckham, Rashmi thought that she had missed the opportunity to stand up to her parents, like Jess, and to communicate her dreams to them.

When I asked her whether she might consider starting this communication now, Rashmi responded that she would try if she knew how. She was afraid that her parents "wouldn't know what she was talking about because they live in a completely different world". I suggested an "experiment": to watch Bend it like Beckham together with her parents and see whether this might help start the dialog that Rashmi was yearning for.

My client came to her next session pleasantly surprised how relatively easy it was to start talking with her parents after watching the movie. The film had served as a catalyst for Rashmi to find the courage and share her dreams about graduate school. Her parents listened and even expressed support. This lifted a big weight from Rashmi's shoulders. Pursuing her professional goals didn't mean she had to sacrifice her family bond.

Sensing her parents' caring sparked new hope in Rashmi about being able to introduce her girlfriend to them at some point. Consequently her relationship improved.

Like in the movie, Bend it like Beckham, Rashmi's family was caught in a

typical dynamic of immigrant families, when the traditional parents try to push their conventional expectations onto their children who have been born into a different cultural world.

This work with an individual client can also be applied to cases in which couples and families are in session.

Guidelines for therapists

- 1. Ask clients to choose a film with a message they want to convey to their partner or family.*
- 2. If they cannot think of a movie, help them with their choice using film indices (e.g. from www.cinematherapy.com)*
- 3. Encourage clients to watch the film together with their partner or family and explain to them why they picked that particular film. This helps clients to enter into a more productive conversation about issues they were not able to communicate before.*

Movies can be used as a tool to improve communication in couples and family work. Sometimes communication between clients is strained because they try to communicate a concept that is unfamiliar to their partner or another family member. A film can introduce understanding through readily grasped images. In my work with couples I usually ask clients to choose a film with the message they want to convey to their partner. If they cannot think of a movie, I make suggestions. By watching the film together and explaining to their partner why they picked that particular movie, both of them can enter into a more productive conversation. The film serves as a metaphor, and therefore represents feelings and ideas that a client had trouble putting into words.

The following work with the *The Secret Lives of Dentists* (2003) demonstrates how a movie can be with couples that struggle with communication issues.

Review

*Based on a novella from Jane Smiley's book *The Age of Grief*, this movie tells the story about an apparently happy family. But we learn fast that there is more going on than what meets the eye.*

David and his wife Dana are successful dentists who work in the same office. They have been married for ten years. David is the primary parent for their three daughters. He senses that his wife has grown more distant but he doesn't know what to do about it. He suspects that Dana may be having an affair with the musical director of the amateur opera troupe she sings in. Speaking a bit too loud to her, one can sense David studying her for evidence of sin. His eyes study her legs and the hem of her skirt, wondering what her sexual needs might be.

Eventually David secretly happens upon his wife and the director having an intimate moment. He is furious with her for betraying him but unwilling to confront her with what he knows, lest she leave him. To keep his family together, he demonstrates the well-meaning victim of circumstance who was wronged. As a metaphor for his inner world and analogy for his view of relationships he admires the resilience of teeth above all things: "Only life can kill teeth, because once you die, your teeth go right on living".

At the same time his more alive inner world appears in the form of David's destructive shadow self. He sinks into a fantasy, which takes the form of the ghost-like Slater, an angered patient. David had filled a cavity of the real person, Slater, only to be confronted at the community opera by him, as he holds up a filling that had dropped out and informs the audience that David is a lousy dentist. Now Slater becomes a manifestation of David's repressed emotions by entering his consciousness as an alter ego who keeps pushing him to act out his darkest thoughts. He encourages David to ditch the wife, go on the road, chuck it all, and leave the kids. When his daughters act out, he tells David, "These kids ought to be struck. May I hit them?" David has to think for a moment before he says no.

When his wife tries to talk to David he is unavailable. She says she wishes they were closer: "You scare me a little." At one point Dana tells him she is experiencing their marriage as getting smaller and smaller.

David's uptightness and the unhealthy dynamics between them send waves of tension throughout the household. A physician implies that their oldest daughter's stomach problems are related to arguments the parents are having in front of the children. The youngest daughter wants nothing but her daddy, even striking the mother when placed in her arms.

And then, a stomach virus mimics the sick relationship between the parties. David throws up first before the illness passes from one family member to the next, over the course of five wearying, nauseous days. He cares for the family while coming apart inside. The physical purging and weakness seems to induce a process of emotional cleansing as well as increased vulnerability. As David and Dana let go of their defensive postures the whole family discovers a new potential for emotional intimacy. The couple stops taking each other for granted.

Cinema Therapy

A married couple in their thirties, Christine and Sean, came in telling me that they were close to getting divorced. Since the couple had gotten married a year ago they had reached an impasse in their relationship. They lived with Christine's eight year-old son, Mathew, whose grades at

school have been declining for a while. Mathew's biological father was not in the picture.

Sean complained that Christine is not affectionate any more and rarely wants to have sex. He called her "cold and indifferent" and believed that their communication was compromised because for Christine, English was a second language.

Christine thought that her language skills were adequate. She had given up trying to explain to her husband that she doesn't feel attracted to him when she feels taken for granted because he "wedges out in front of the TV instead of engaging with her or helping with chores".

After several sessions into our work, when they were particularly hard to move out of their blaming game, I ask them to watch *The Secret Lives of Dentists* and gave them the handout that is mentioned below.

The couple came back shocked because they recognized the effect that their tension might have on Mathew. Both identified with David and Dana in different ways. Suddenly our work started to move forward again. The film served them as a metaphor that represented the feelings they couldn't put into words before without attacking the other person.

Guidelines for therapists

Handout given to clients before the movie:

Keep the following questions in mind while you watch:

1. What parts of the movie touch you most?
2. What character do you most identify with and when?
3. How does Dana's and David's relationship affect their children?
4. How could they improve their communication?
5. What helped them improve their relationship?

Questions after the movie:

1. How does Dana and David's relationship compare to yours?
2. What can you learn from them?
3. What can you do better?
4. The fact that you were touched by parts of the movie might indicate that there is a message that guides you toward healing and wholeness for yourself and your family. What is this message?

Cinema Therapy Group

In therapy and support groups, members often experience healing and transformation, because others witness their process of sharing with presence and empathy.

The impact of films as catalysts for psychological processes dovetails well with the therapeutic effects of group dynamics. Group members' reflections about their emotional response to a movie are an added component that enriches group therapy. By understanding and sharing what moved them about certain movie scenes or characters, participants acquire an effective tool to get to know themselves and others. After leaving the group they are able to continue using what they have learned about self-discovery when watching films.

The general mood of a film often reappears as a feeling among members in the group. There frequently is a joyful atmosphere during the meeting after a humorous or uplifting film. A heavier mood is usually felt after darker movies with content that addresses problematic lives and interactions. When they become aware of this, members learn how susceptible we all are to outside influences. Since a movie is not even a *real* outside influence but just light projected on a screen, it becomes even more obvious to everyone how our inner experience is shaped by projections on our environment.

Becoming consciously aware of the atmosphere during the subsequent group interactions, which are affected by the general mood of the film, helps members acknowledge their projections. This is usually easier when a lighthearted mood is observed than when tension appears. Group participants often recognize the darker projection in other members first, which can help as a bridge to becoming more aware of their own unconscious responses. As group members apply these insights to their everyday life, they learn to understand themselves better, which helps them become more authentic and real.

General guidelines for Cinema Therapy group facilitators

1. Decide how frequently you want to meet and ask group members to make a commitment to a certain number of group meetings. I found it most beneficial to meet weekly and to make an initial twelve-week commitment. In my groups participants can extend their commitment every twelve weeks.
2. Make a decision about the structure of your meetings. You can be very creative with this. The group will inevitably develop a rhythm and pattern of work over time. Here is just one possibility: To mark a starting point and help everyone to become centered and present, one group member might lead everyone in a short, guided meditation. A general check-in by each group member can follow before everyone talks about his or her movie experience. The exercises that are suggested in this book can be integrated in the sharing

process. At the end of the meeting each participant might briefly mention how he or she are feeling about the group process.

3. Group members usually form close bonds. Everyone's presence is important to develop and maintain trust. Tell the group members to let you know ahead of time if they cannot make it to a meeting or when you are planning to leave the group.
4. Make an agreement about confidentiality.
5. Avoid getting stuck in critiquing the movie: instead, come back to your experience.
6. Because personalities are different, group members will respond differently to mood, meaning, symbolism, and characters of films. Let group members know that respecting these differences helps everyone learn from others and creates emotional safety in the group.
7. Ask group members to not interrupt another member's sharing.
8. Ask group members to be careful with giving advice. Supportive listening is usually more helpful.
9. Ask group members to be considerate of the time. Extroverts need to avoid monopolizing the meeting. Overall, everyone should have approximately equal time available.
10. Ask group members to respect introverted members as they might need to take their time before they open up in front of everyone else.

Ideally, the group watches a video or DVD together while everyone applies the guiding suggestions about watching with conscious awareness. After the movie, the group should share their experience. But this format can lead to long meeting times that are not always convenient.

The next best thing is for each group member to watch the movie at home prior to the meeting, using the same suggestions. Depending on the size of the group and whether you prefer to spend one or more meetings on processing a specific film, a meeting time between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours seems best. A different movie can be viewed at home every other week. Group members can talk during the following two meetings about everyone's learning and healing experiences, as well as any feelings that the film brought up.

Though the collective viewing experience in a theater can enhance the emotional impact of a movie in a powerful way, it is not always practical. It limits the film choice to the new releases and does not allow the viewer to watch certain scenes over again. For some it is easier to get in touch with their emotional responses in the safety of their home.

Guidelines for the movie selection

A film could be selected for different reasons. Here are three of them:

1. Watching the movie serves to elicit a group exchange focused on specific issues such as addictions, overcoming and growing from life's

challenges, pursuing one's passion, strength in vulnerability, anger and forgiveness, finding meaning in life, etc.

2. The movie's allegoric message supports healing and growth in areas on which the choosing member is currently working. A participant might therefore choose a certain movie because a film character models how a certain goal on this group member's inner journey can be achieved. Equally possible, the film might be chosen for a character's demonstration of failure. In the latter case learning happens through the character's mistakes, by proxy. Other group participants usually discover that the selected film serves them in a similar way even though originally they would not have considered it as helpful.
3. The movie, or parts of it, touched the chooser deeply. The subsequent group process helps this member in their self-discovery. It also provides an opportunity for the others to get to know this participant better because she shows herself through their choice, as well as through sharing her responses to the movie. As other members talk about their reactions to the film, the whole group starts to know each other better. Often their responses are surprisingly diverse. The subsequent group processes serve as a practicing ground for tolerance and acceptance.

Avoiding pitfalls

Getting stuck in critiquing the movie is usually an indicator that group participants do not feel safe enough emotionally to reveal their personal truths. This insecurity is not always conscious.

You can help group members to return their focus inwards with questions like:

- Did the movie touch me, positively or negatively?
- If the film had a unique message for me, what was it?
- What new ideas for new behaviors did the movies introduce?
- Did I experience something that connected me with health and wholeness, my inner wisdom, or higher self as I watched the film?

Because the general mood of the film often reappears as a feeling among members in the group, the problematic parts in movies can potentially also surface during the group meeting. Understanding this influence can be critical for the group. When members are conscious enough, this offers a wonderful opportunity to work through the arising difficult group dynamics. This process can take some time.

Sometimes group participants with similar patterns of repression, denial, and self-deception collude to avoid the more challenging messages that lie in their responses to movie characters. In such situations, members go easy on each other, but fear dominates their behavior, and certain shadow qualities do not come to light through group interaction. When such a pattern of repressive subconscious group collusion occurs, it can be difficult to overcome. If you believe that this might happen in your group, address the possibilities of denial

based on fear, and watch a movie in which the allegoric message is *courage to overcome challenges*.

You might also consider adding a new member to the group. Sometimes new participants, who do not share the same history and experience, will enliven the group and help break down collusion aimed at avoiding particular issues. Be aware that, at least initially, some old group members might not feel open and welcoming toward new participants unless they show willingness to go along with the group's established patterns. If this response persists, the group needs to discuss those dynamics before talking about movies again.

Self-discovery, Healing and Growth through Work with Matrices

The following matrices are tools I developed for clients to understand their projections and use to this understanding for their growth.

The Film Matrix

Film Matrix:

Character you	like most	like least
identify with strongly or in some ways	I	II
identify with less or not at all	III	IV

The following guidelines are given to clients when working in *The Evocative Way* after they watched a specific movie or while reflecting on several films.

Guidelines for therapists to give to clients

Quadrant I: Has there been one character that you especially liked and with whom you especially identified? Was there a character who sometimes acted, felt, or viewed the world in a similar way as you do? This character may also have shown some behaviors that are different from yours, but focus only on the similarities you liked. Write their name into Quadrant I. If you can think of several characters, choose the one you identified with most.

Quadrant II: Write down the name of a different character in which you saw yourself, but for this quadrant choose a character you disliked overall. He should have aspects of his personality or should have behaved and expressed himself in ways of which you do not approve. And again, if you can think of several characters, choose the one you identified with most.

For Quadrant III: Choose a character that strikes you as being different from yourself but whom you liked or admired, either for their innate qualities or possibly for the way they related to others. If you can think of several characters, choose the one about whom you feel most positively.

In Quadrant IV: Write the name of a character you could not identify with, or could only identify with very little and about whom you had negative feelings perhaps because of their demeanor, expressions, or actions. If in doubt, choose the one you identify with the least and toward whom you felt most negatively.

The Self Matrix

Self Matrix:

Qualities or capacities you	like in yourself	dislike in yourself
are aware of	I	II
are not always fully aware of	III	IV

In this Matrix, clients are asked to identify their own characteristics that each of the characters in the Film Matrix remind them of.

The upper left square of the Self Matrix, Quadrant I, reflects their own realized or unrealized potentials that they are conscious of; the upper right Quadrant II, represents their conscious shortcomings.

Quadrant III shows positive qualities that clients are not usually aware of.

Quadrant IV illuminates the shortcomings the client doesn't like in others. I usually explain that we are often not conscious of the fact that we carry these traits deep inside ourselves (repression), and therefore project them onto others. Clients learn about the possibility to become more whole and to find emotional healing and inner freedom by embracing their repressed shadow self.

The Growth Matrix

With help of the Self Matrix, clients are able to identify aspects in themselves which the movie characters reminded them of. Now the therapist and clients are exploring how they can make use of this new understanding for healing and growth. The Growth Matrix provides a structure for this process. With the help of the Growth Matrix, clients learn to use the Self Matrix for their development.

Growth Matrix:

	How can you enhance and strengthen your positive qualities and capacities?	How can you learn to have compassion with your real or perceived shortcomings and grow beyond them?
Qualities you are fully aware of	I	II
Qualities you are not always fully aware of	III	IV

Any therapeutic intervention or exercises for homework from the therapist's toolbox are helpful here if they fit into the categories. In Chapter 10 of *E-Motion Picture Magic: A Movie Lover's Guide to Healing and Transformation* (Wolz, 2005, pp.154 – 175), numerous exercises are described in detail.

On the left side of the Growth Matrix (Quadrant I and III), clients usually note exercises such as affirmations and self-hypnosis, which help develop and strengthen their potential.

On the right side (Quadrant II and IV), clients note tools that help them to either accept or overcome shortcomings and deficiencies. Exercises to help develop compassion with deficiencies they don't have control over, such as "defending

against the Inner Critic," are introduced here. Exercises that strengthen endurance and determination are introduced to help them overcome shortcomings, which can be eliminated.

Guidelines and Limitations

Movie Examples for Cinema Therapy Work

- *Frida* - Grief, Courage
Illness, disability, creativity, grief, transformation

- *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* - Self-Esteem
Self-esteem, relationships, cultural issues, especially cross-cultural relationships

- *Under the Tuscan Sun* - Separation, Divorce

- *Groundhog Day* - Repetitive Patterns
The main character experiences waking up to exactly the same day over and over until he goes through a transformation. Clients can contemplate being stuck in a repetitive pattern and how to get out of it, and use their experience to learn from it.

- *Sliding Doors* - Choosing to take Risks
Movie follows two possible alternative lives of the main character. Clients can contemplate how certain decisions can have significant consequences, even split second decisions. What does this mean for them? The film can make clients see each moment as important and precious. This promotes mindfulness.

- *About Schmidt* - Retirement, learning by proxy
Aging, depression, retirement

- *Harold and Maude* - Finding one's authentic self
Meaning of life, follow your heart, authenticity, humor

- *Field of Dreams* - Following inner guidance
Follow your dream and intuition, relationship

- *The Piano* - Getting in touch with passion
Passion, willpower, strength in the face of adversity

- *Before Sunset* - Intimacy issues

- *The Secret Live of Dentists* – Communication

- *As Good as it Gets* - Working with OCD

Obsessive compulsive tendencies: what understanding is needed? Is compassion needed?

Possible Applications of Work with Certain Movies

The following movies examples are categorized according to areas of therapeutic problems and growth.

- Self-esteem
My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Real Women Have Curves
- Grief and transformation
Frida (illness, disability), *Shadowlands* (bereavement), *Mr. Holland's Opus* (aging, disability)
- Anger and forgiveness
The Straight Story, Gandhi, An Unfinished Life
- Addictions
28 Days (substance abuse), *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (eating disorder)
- Vocational issues
Patch Adams (fighting for vocation), *Erin Brockovich* (finding true vocation)
- Communication, couples', family issues
A Walk on the Moon (communication, adolescents, affair), *The Story of Us* (conflict and negotiation, commitment), *Philadelphia* (nontraditional relationships)
- Inner guidance
Field of Dreams, Places in the Heart
- Spiritual awareness
Jonathan Livingston Seagull, It's a Wonderful Life, Powder, City of Angels

Many more categorized movie suggestions can be found in the film indices on www.cinematherapy.com and in *E-Motion Picture Magic* (Wolz, 2005).

Guidelines for Work with Prescribed Films – Preparation

- Clarify use of film scene versus movie as a whole

The length of the therapeutic hour doesn't allow showing a whole movie. Therapists who use movies in their work are divided in their opinion on whether to show movie clips in session or to let clients watch a whole film at home. Showing a clip during a session has the advantage for clients that they have a more immediate experience, and for therapists that they have more control over the

message they want to convey. Some therapists believe that other parts of a movie could deviate from the intended goal.

Asking a client to watch a whole movie at home has the following advantages:

1. Because of equipment limitations and time constraints during a session, this approach is usually more practical.
2. The experience of a whole movie allows the viewer to get “pulled” into the experience more and therefore identify more with the characters, which is important for Cinema Therapy.
3. Movies are often useful for clients who go through life transitions. Experiencing a movie character throughout an entire cycle of transition is usually helpful. For many clients it is easier to understand how to resolve a movie character’s dilemma first before they apply it to their own situation. Often, only the whole movie can provide this experience.
4. Watching movies at home in this context serves as a bridge between therapy and life.

If a focus on specific scenes is required, the therapist can direct the client’s attention to it, before and after they watch the film.

- Clarify your intent when assigning a film, especially if a client might mistake the role identification
- Provide written guidelines (for example: guidelines for watching movies with conscious awareness.)
- Suggest taking notes about emotional responses to scenes during or after the film
- If appropriate, encourage to watch movie with friends or family

The criteria you use in selecting a film should not be based on the same criteria typically used by a movie critic or a jury of a film festival. For Cinema Therapy to be effective it is much more important that the choice center on finding a film that speaks to a client about their specific life situation, not on whether it has high artistic merit. A movie that touches clients deeply or demonstrates a character development they are aspiring to will help them best with their healing or personal growth.

Guidelines for Work with Films in *The Prescriptive Way* or *The Evocative Way* - Follow up

Discuss reactions to film. Use client’s response according to your theoretical orientation

- Some possible evocative questions are:
 1. How did the movie touch you, positively or negatively?
 2. If the film had a unique message for you, what was it?
 3. What new ideas for new behaviors - adding new ones or letting go of old patterns - did the movie introduce?

4. Did you experience something that connected you with health and wholeness, your inner wisdom, or higher self as you watched certain scenes or characters?
5. What other films do you remember having seen that might take the discussion a step further?

Limitations of Cinema Therapy

➤ Effectiveness suffers with clients who are incapable of drawing insights from metaphor

➤ Prescribing films is often not effective with small children except in family therapy

Young children's developmental limitations reduce the effectiveness of prescribing films usually because of the time lapse between their viewing of the film at home and the discussion in session. This is different when a discussion follows immediately after a clip is shown in session, or when families watch movies together at home in the context of family therapy.

➤ No film assignment to clients with serious psychiatric disorder seen in private practice

When these clients watch films in their own homes, it might be difficult for them to deal with issues that come up during or immediately after viewing. This is especially true for clients that have some kind of psychotic disorder because they might have trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. (Ulus, 2003)

➤ No film assignment, when violence in client's home

Films sometimes introduce subjects that clients may have avoided in therapy, which can be very productive under many circumstances. When there is violence in the home, the risk of unmonitored film assignment and an unpredictable reaction is too great.

➤ No film assignment, when client recently had trauma similar to a character in the movie

When a client recently went through a traumatic experience similar to that of the character in a movie, the film experience can potentially be re-traumatizing. I work with clients who have experienced a murder in their family. I am very careful with assignments of movies that have a murder as part of the plot, even if this is not a dominant part of the film. The client's attention most likely would go to and stay with that part.

As clinicians we need to make decisions about a client's readiness for a film by using similar criteria as we use with any high-impact homework or other kind of intervention.

➤No film assignment, if client might infer wrong motives

It is possible that a client might infer the wrong motives into your film assignment when the movie shows a certain unattractive character, which fits the client in ways that could be offensive. This could negatively affect your rapport with the client. You might not assign this kind of movie, or you might use the client's response for transference work.

➤No film assignment, if client dislikes movies

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For additional resources go to: <http://drzur.com/online/cinemasources.html>