Harnessing the Power of Film:  
On the relationship between film and psychology  

By  
Rhiannon C. Houch  
Pitzer College  
December 7, 2010
Harnessing the Power of Film:
On the relationship between film and psychology

The relationship between film and psychology has long been a subject of interest. Film and psychology share many common themes including motivation, truthful behavior, emotions, tactics for self-preservation, and subtext (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). While filmmakers create the metaphors, psychologists uncover their meaning. As a major aspect of mainstream society around the globe, researchers have searched for ways to harness the power of film (Baron-Cohen, Golan, Chapman, & Granader, 2007; Emmers-Sommer, Triplett, Pauley, Hanzal, & Rhea, 2005; Igartua, Cheng, & Lopes, 2003; Schmitt & Blass, 2008).

Filmmakers have often turned to psychology as a source of inspiration for films about motivation and the human condition. In turn, psychologists have turned to film as a source for teaching psychology or as a source for metaphor when working with clients. While literature about the theoretical benefits of film in the classroom and psychotherapy session can be easily found, empirical evidence supporting such claims is lacking. This review of literature explores the relationship between film and psychotherapy, discusses harnessing the power of film in psychological settings, and recommends further research.

Relationship Between Film and Psychology

History

Psychoanalysis and cinema emerged around the same time in 1895. While the Lumière brothers worked on their early films about ordinary people in Paris, Freud shared his theories about human behavior and experience (Hauke, 2009).
As they continued to develop, so did the bonds between film and analytical psychology. A new field of study recently emerged to discuss the connection between film and analytic psychology; Jungian film studies focuses on the influences of Jungian psychology on cinema (Connolly, 2009). Izod (2000) described the influence of Jungian psychology on the movie going experience as a process of actively engaging in the symbols presented by filmmakers by integrating our own personality and experiences into the interpretation of the presented symbols. The film is brought to life by the viewer’s interpretation, giving the viewer some control of the film’s meaning (Izod, 2000). The field of Jungian film studies has grown in popularity, spurring the creation of a Jungian Film Festival in 2005 (Connolly, 2009).

The historical link between psychoanalysis and film is universal. Bhugra and Gupta (2009) explored the portrayal of psychoanalysis in films made in India. The portrayal of psychoanalysis, mental illness, and male/female relationships in film changed over time representing the social climate and ideals of post-colonial India as it emerged as its own republic (Bhugra, 2005; Bhugra & Gupta, 2009).

**Portrayal of Psychology in Film**

Filmmakers often use human motivation as a source of inspiration. As such, several psychological issues, including substance abuse, suicide, and mental illness, have been portrayed in cinema since its inception. Early films about substance abuse such as *The Lost Weekend* (1948) portrayed the popular opinion of alcoholism in a pre-Alcoholics Anonymous society (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990). Hersey (2005) analyzed the depiction of alcoholics in three contemporary films and found the treatment process was often limited to White, upper-class individuals. Palvides (2005) identified a
common theme for the motivating factors of suicide in four contemporary films: Whose Life Is It Anyway? (1981), 'Night, Mother (1986), One True Thing (1998), and The Hours (2002). The characters were seeking release from mental illness, which corresponded with the cultural view of the best way to deal with mental illness (Pavlides, 2005).

The historical representations of psychology in film have moved into academia, further signifying the significance to the field of psychology. Michael Z. Fleming taught a class explored the historical representations of mental illness in cinema, tracing the depictions of “madness” in film and the diagnostic interpretations of the time. Surveys revealed the influential nature of portrayals of the mentally ill in film on the general public while finding that some films were more accurate than others in their depictions. The class was highly recommended and considered germane to education in psychology (Fleming et al., 1990).

However, representations of mental illness are often distorted for the sake of dramatic intrigue. The prevalence of certain disorders is grossly distorted based on the popularity of certain films (e.g. dissociative identity disorder). While a small percentage of people living with mental illness are dangerous, a strong link between violence and mental illness has been portrayed in film for decades (Kondo, 2008). Wedding and Niemiec (2003) described five common myths perpetuated through popular films: eccentricity is often incorrectly labeled as mental illness, mental illness manifests as a result of a schizophrenogenic parent, the presumed traumatic etiology, finding love will conquer the mental illness, and incorrect origins of split personalities. Although entertaining, these myths can influence the popular perception of people with mental illness.
The depiction of psychotherapy has been another popular dramatic element in film. In 1947, *Mine Own Executioner* truthfully explored psychotherapy including the conflicts that arise when addressing issues including schizophrenia (Konigsberg, 2010). *The Sixth Sense* demonstrated the need for the therapist to come to terms with his own issues in order to be effective for his client (Stein, 2003). An examination of *Good Will Hunting* reveals the importance of the client/therapist relationship in effective psychotherapy. While the dramatic representation may have straddled the line of ethical relationships, the nature of their psychotherapeutic relationship was considered positive, reflecting the cultural acceptance of psychotherapy (Pichardo, 2000). Films about psychotherapy can be beneficial to the practice, helping reduce stigma. Accurate portrayals of psychotherapy and mental illness have been found to reduce stigma in severe mental illness (Penn, Chamberlin, & Mueser, 2003).

The nature of psychotherapy and the perception of psychotherapists have been exaggerated in film as well, creating stereotypes and unnecessary stigma. Psychotherapy has frequently been oversimplified—requiring one to lie on the couch and uncover dark secrets in order to be healed; or insight from a single session can quickly cure any problems (Sadr, 2006). Psychotherapists are often stereotypically portrayed including the unethical therapist that engages in inappropriate relationships or the cold, ineffectual authoritarian (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Film can be beneficial to psychology once the myths are understood and overcome.

**Film and Emotion**

Art has the power to move us. People become emotionally engaged in art, whether it be a painting, piece of literature, or film.
The complex emotions experienced when viewing a work of art have been studied to quantify their “realness” (Goldstein, 2009; Mellmann, 2002). Goldstein found no difference in the level of sadness experienced when viewing a film clip versus recalling a similar personal experience (Goldstein, 2009).

Film theorists have said we respond to film with our social emotions. Movie going is a collective experience and oftentimes our first sentimental responses are reflexive. For example, it is an automatic response to laugh when entering a room of laughing people (Mellmann, 2002). Emotional responses can be influenced by several factors including gender, culture, age, and others watching the film. African Americans and Chinese Americans reacted more positively to an amusing clip when the actors were from the same ethnic group (Roberts, 2004). Gender differences have been identified in film seeking based on emotional responses. Banerjee, Greene, Krcmar, Bagdasarov, & Ruginyte (2008) found greater preference for low-arousal and happy-mood films by female-viewers whereas male-viewers demonstrated greater preference for high-arousal films.

**Influence of film on Society**

Film has long been a powerful influence on society; it has been found to influence attitudes and shape ideas. After interviewing respondents who viewed the film **JFK**, Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo (1995) found a significant arousal of anger and a changed acceptance of the broad conspiracy theories presented in the film surrounding JFK’s assassination. The idea of inserting messages within the entertainment context in order to capture attention has also been studied to motivate behavior; for example, engaging in new behavior, preventing or stopping current behavior, and spurring consumer behavior.
Iguarta et al. (2003) used different formats of video to identify the best way to promote HIV/AIDS prevention, and found increased favorable attitude toward the recommended preventative behaviors as more cognitive processing was induced. Messages arousing fear have been found to be particularly persuasive; stronger anti-smoking sentiments were expressed after viewing high-threat fear-appeal videos from the American Lung Association (Schmitt & Blass, 2008). Product placement in film and TV has been used to motivate audiences to purchase specific products. Product and brand exposure in a successful film was associated with positive movement in stock prices for the company (Wiles & Danielova, 2009).

**Fact vs. Fiction**

Studies have explored the impact of perceived realism on the viewer. Research has found greater emotional response and memory retention when a film is perceived as less realistic and presented as fiction rather than nonfiction (Goldstein, 2009; Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). A viewer can often identify nonfiction, such as a documentary, from fiction, based on audiovisual cues and plot points. The type of shot, style of music, and plot points of the film can give away the nature of the film (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). However, even in a documentary setting, storylines and themes are an idealized version of nonfiction. A documentary about a woman with breast cancer was manipulated to conform to popular ideas of dying rather than the reality facing the subject of the film (Armstrong-Coster, 2001).

**The Paradox: Enjoyment of Negative Emotions**

People enjoy experiencing negative emotions, such as sadness and horror, at the movies as evidenced by popularity of both genres at the box office. Studies have also
looked at this seemingly paradoxical effect (Bartsch, Appel, & Storch, 2010; Labott & Martin, 1988; Oliver, Weaver, James, & Sargent, 2000; Tamborini, 2003). Bartsch et al. (2010) found that moviegoers high in need of affect experience higher levels of negative emotions and evaluate those emotions more positively. Tamborini, Stiff, & Heidel (1990) identified empathy as a large variable for predicting emotional responses to horror films. One study found respondents most saddened by a film were more likely to have experienced tragedy in their own lives in the past (Engel, Frader, Barry, & Morrow, 1984). Gender differences in the enjoyment of sad films exist; females and feminine viewers report greater enjoyment of the genre of sad-dramatic films (Oliver et al., 2000).

Several theories attempt to explain the paradox. Film, and the realm of fiction, creates a safe space to experience and confront emotions (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004; Tamborini, 2003). Film often portrays an idealized version of reality that removed from the self. Viewers lack responsibility for the problems of the character, allowing for expression of emotions without the guilt or obligation to help the character (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004). Tamborini (2003) described the possibility of evolutionary origins of curiosity and protective vigilance to explain popular fascination with horror. If contents of a film become too much, individuals have the option and free will to walk away and stop viewing the film, and that option does not exist for real life problems (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004). In viewing an entire film where, in most cases catharsis is reached, emotions can come full circle resulting in decreased stress and depression (Labott & Martin, 1988).

A film’s power to elicit emotions is not strictly a Western phenomenon. Sato et al. (2007) replicated a study by Gross & Levenson (1995) on a Japanese sample to test
the universal reach of film on emotion. They found that all films presented elicited the target emotions expected in respondents (Sato et al., 2007).

Harnessing the Power of Film

Teaching with Film

Using film in the classroom. Film has been a popular tool for classroom learning for decades. Film has conveyed important messages about culture and history, aid in the retention of information, and serve as an entertaining medium for education. If used properly, film can be an effective learning tool for many subjects and age groups. However, many warnings against ineffectual applications of film in the classroom are presented in the literature.

Studies on the capabilities of film on information retention were published as early as 1933. Hansen (1933) found increased retention of knowledge from an instructional video on making pottery both immediately following the learning session and 3-½ weeks later, compared to a control that simply read the instructions. In 1944, an article described the best motivational techniques to include when creating an instructional video to enhance learning at the time (Hamilton, 1944).

Today’s generations, dubbed the “TV Generation” and “Virtual Generation,” have been exposed to media at an early age. It is not uncommon for a child to learn their ABC’s or counting from popular television series (Smith, 2009). The visual culture is a dominant aspect of society and plays into the innate learning strength of students raised on visual media (Tejeda, 2008). The availability of DVDs, or streaming video from the internet, make the use of film in the classroom an inexpensive and highly accessible option.
The use of film in the classroom has been found to enhance learning through enhanced retention, exposure to visual representations of ideas taught in text, and the requirement to think critically when analyzing a film. It is believed that retention is increased when viewing topics in film because there is dual coding of the information (e.g., visually in film in addition to lecture or text) (Butler, Zaromb, Lyle, & Roediger 2009). Increased retention is also likely due to the strong images and emotional content portrayed in film (Bird & Godwin, 2006). Butler et al. (2009) found a 50% increase in retention when respondents were presented a complementary film clip to their texts.

Visual repetition and summaries in educational films increased knowledge acquisition in young children aged 6-8 (Michel & Roebers, 2008).

Film enhances learning by helping transition information learned in the classroom to the real world by providing examples of real-life scenarios played out on the big screen (Feinberg, 1996; Grant, 2002; Stinchfield, 2006; Wonderly, 2009). Blum (2006) created a popular weekly film series for her community to promote cultural understanding by viewing cultural and historical films and discussing them as a group.

Film has been especially helpful in language and anthropology courses because other cultures can be examined in a visual realm. Teachers are able to show students people of distant cultures in their native tongues and cultural practices. Bird’s study on the use of film in the anthropology classroom found students began to derive meaning only after discussion provided context for cultural practices outside of the norms of the group (Bird & Godwin, 2006). One English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class unanimously agreed that viewing film helped students to learn conversational English as the films introduced several conversational exchanges, slang and expressions, multiple
dialects, and contextualized vocabulary (Seferoğlu, 2008). DVD special features, including the use of subtitles, can help learners of all levels enhance language comprehension (King, 2002).

One of the most beneficial aspects of using film in the classroom is its ability to enhance critical thinking and articulation of thoughts. Films often serve as a catalyst for discussion as students analyze and attempt to derive meaning (Boyatzis, 2002; Kirsh, 1998; Smith, 2009). In addition, film can engage student interest and extend the range of student experience (Davis, 2000). Undergraduate students appreciate the challenge to engage in higher-level critical thinking and analysis when viewing a film in the classroom (Baehr, 2010). Watts (2007) found increased articulation and literacy in students in her primary classroom after teaching literacy through studying and making a film. Students began the process soft-spoken, and sometimes unable to articulate what was happening in a film. At the end of the session, students became more expressive and able to use symbols and metaphor in their own films (Watts, 2007).

In order for students to actively engage in a film for learning, appropriate context and framing must be provided on what is about to be screened. Bird and Godwin (2006) found students were not engaged (i.e., walking out of the classroom, talking during the screening, etc.) and took longer to analyze information presented. Students cared more about the learning process when they felt like part of the decision-making process such as in the construction of meaning in a film (Bird & Godwin, 2006). To aid in framing the films recommended in class, Smith distributed an accompanying sheet of discussion questions for every topic covered in the class (Smith, 2009). Fleming distributed historical context to the films screened in class in the format of the diagnostic information
for the represented mental illness from the version of the DSM available at the time the film was released (Fleming et al., 1990).

Discussion of the film immediately following viewing is imperative in the learning process. Students can walk away with the wrong message or, even worse, no message (Bird & Godwin, 2006). Films can reinforce naïve beliefs or inaccurate information, so it is important films are discussed and reviewed critically (Grant, 2002; Stoddard & Marcus, 2010). Discussion promotes critical-thinking and facilitated discussion allows a non-threatening environment to discuss controversial topics (Bhugra, 2003; Villalba & Redmond, 2008).

In addition to the benefits discussed, certain drawbacks exist when using film in the classroom to complement learning. Sometimes teachers rely on the film itself to convey the message to be learned; however, individuals bring with them their own experiences and personality and may derive different meaning from the same film (Bird & Godwin, 2006; Izod, 2000). Although film can enhance retention of learned materials, misinformation represented in films can lead to false recollection of information. Studies found an increased recall of misinformation as truth, as well as increased confidence that the misinformation was truth, when presented historically inaccurate film clips versus accurate textual representations (Butler et al., 2009; Marsh, 2003).

**Teaching Psychology with Film.** Feature films have been a popular resource in the teaching of psychology. Empirical evidence in the form of classroom evaluations reinforce the valuable experience film provides in understanding concepts of psychology (Baehr, 2010; Conner, 1996; Fleming et al., 1990). Films can be used to demonstrate symptoms and reflections of mental illness, psychotherapy, and professionals in the field
of psychology (Buda, 2010; Fleming et al., 1990; Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2010). Some films demonstrate psychosis and other symptoms from the perspective of the afflicted individual, allowing for a deeper first-hand view of mental illness (Fleming et al., 1990).

Film analysis using theory and research from a psychology course improved students’ understanding of the course material and enhanced their ability to critically evaluate various types of film (Kirsh, 1998). Several publications provide recommendations of films to be used to portray various concepts in psychology including summaries, discussion points, and classifications of the topics represented in the films (Bhugra, 2003; Rosenstock, 2003; Wedding et al., 2010; Zimmermann, 2006). This aids the psychology professor as well as equips future psychologists with a library of films that could potentially be used psychotherapy.

Film can teach higher-level concepts required in psychology, such as empathy, through reflection of behaviors demonstrated by characters in film (Raingruber, 2003). Furst (2007) used film to demonstrate and discuss the various steps in bereavement in order to enhance recognition and empathy in medical students. Film offers a means to develop insights through reflective discussion, such as how the viewer is feeling and whether the viewer feels the clinician behaved appropriately in the film (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004). Through critical discussion of the behavior of others in film, students can talk about the best way to proceed in various situations.

Some psychologists warn against using popular feature films to teach psychology due to the stereotypes and dramatic exaggerations represented in film (Byrne, 2003; Greenberg, 2009). By understanding the myths portrayed in film, psychologists could
recognize and help clients overcome fears associated with mental illness and psychotherapy (Sadr, 2006).

**Film in Psychotherapy**

**History of Cinematherapy.** The use of film in psychotherapy is a modern adaptation of bibliotherapy, a more proven method of therapy that utilizes books as metaphor in psychotherapy (Portadin, 2006). The term “cinematherapy” was coined by Berg-Cross (1990) and appears to be the most popular and well-documented method of psychotherapy involving film (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). In cinematherapy, clinicians assign films to be viewed by the patient for discussion at the next session. The clinician and patient would then discuss themes identified in the film as they relate to the patient. This type of session was recommended in an outpatient setting with patients of moderate intelligence and cognitive function (M. Fleming & Bohnel, 2009). When cinematherapy is employed, the films discussed provide an indirect, non-threatening way to discuss problems, therapeutic metaphor, and can spur conversation between the client and the clinician (Waitkus, 2009). Empirical support for the methodology of cinematherapy is sparse, relying on case studies and personal accounts (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Waitkus, 2009; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003).

The lack of a solid methodology has led to various approaches to cinematherapy. Fleming has successfully used cinematherapy in the assessment of inpatients during intake at his mental health facility. Film created an avenue for highly resistant patients to discuss current attitudes, moods, and perceptions of current circumstances (M. Fleming & Bohnel, 2009). Bierman et al. (2003) successfully implemented monthly group cinematherapy sessions for adolescent girls in a residential treatment facility where the
girls shared and discussed personal experiences after viewing films with themes and storylines similar to their own experiences. Turley and Derdeyn discussed the use of a horror film as metaphor to discuss and work through conflict experienced by a 13-year-old boy (Derdeyn & Turley, 1994; Turley & Derdeyn, 1990). In many cases, films have been simply discussed in psychotherapy without a specific process in order to find meaning and discuss personal sources of conflict (Greenberg, 2009; Hauke, 2009; Hewison, 2000; Wolz, 2010).

**Benefits of using film in psychotherapy.** Film is a beneficial tool in psychotherapy because it creates a common language between the clinician and the client (M. Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). As such, film can be a catalyst for discussion. Wedding and Niemiec (2003) described a case study involving a disengaged Swedish patient who opened up after discussing the works of Ingmar Bergman, a renowned Swedish director. The patients began to cite examples of film that incorporated elements of his personal struggles to help the psychotherapist better understand his condition. The psychotherapist was then able to make further recommendations for treatment, resulting in more energetic and assertive behavior from the patient (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003).

Allowing a patient to select a film for discussion gives the clinician insight on important themes in the patient’s life and serves as a reference point. Film creates a non-threatening, indirect outlet to explore current issues (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Hauke, 2009). Film can also be a rich resource for creating metaphors (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Exploring the topics indirectly allows clients to reframe negative experiences, which can relieve trauma (Kalayjian & Abdolian, 2010).
**Traps of using film in psychotherapy.** It is imperative to avoid certain traps when using film in psychotherapy to ensure efficacy. If recommended inappropriately movies can frame the problem at hand too succinctly, preventing the client from arriving at the necessary conclusions for treatment (Hauke, 2009). It is also important to ensure the focus of conversation is not on the film itself rather than its meaning (Greenberg, 2009). This can lead to great rapport and conversation with the client, but defeats the purpose of using film in psychotherapy.

**Discussion**

This review of literature identified several common threads in the complementary relationship between film and psychology dating back to the origins of each field. The human condition has long piqued the interest of filmmakers and psychologists alike. Psychologists use science to explore motivation, emotion, and behavior; filmmakers use story telling, drama, and visual imagery to capture and explore these themes.

The use of film in psychotherapy requires further investigation. The field of psychology would benefit from a methodology as well described and documented as bibliotherapy. Researchers should continue to test cinematherapy on populations of patients. It is imperative that the psychotherapist has a comfortable understanding of film in order to employ the use of film in the session, which may currently hinder the number of clinicians practicing cinematherapy. The use of film in teaching psychology help train future psychologists, and help future psychotherapists gain an understanding of the films that can serve as metaphor in cinematherapy. Hopefully, with further training and exposure to film, more clinicians will engage in cinematherapy.
Film can serve as a powerful tool to teach, heal, and inspire people. As new technology emerges, the visual media can transcend borders and cultures and help us relate with each other more quickly. By studying the relationship between film and psychology, we can harness the power of film to close gaps, teach critical concepts, and enhance its therapeutic capabilities.
**History of Cinematherapy.** The use of film in psychotherapy is a modern adaptation of bibliotherapy, a more proven method of therapy that utilizes books as metaphor in psychotherapy (Portadin, 2006). The term “cinematherapy” was coined by Berg-Cross (1990) and appears to be the most popular and well-documented method of psychotherapy involving film (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). In cinematherapy, clinicians assign films to be viewed by the patient for discussion at the next session. The clinician and patient would then discuss themes identified in the film as they relate to the patient. This type of session was recommended in an outpatient setting with patients of moderate intelligence and cognitive function (M. Fleming & Bohnel, 2009). When cinematherapy is employed, the films discussed provide an indirect, non-threatening way to discuss problems, therapeutic metaphor, and can spur conversation between the client and the clinician (Waitkus, 2009). Empirical support for the methodology of cinematherapy is sparse, relying on case studies and personal accounts (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009; Waitkus, 2009; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). 173 words
provide an indirect, non-threatening way to discuss problems, to develop therapeutic
metaphors, and spur conversation (Waitkus, 2009). Empirical support for cinematherapy
is sparse, relying on case studies and personal accounts (Fleming & Bohnel, 2009;
References


