The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching
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Mary Banks Gregerson
Editor

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Is there one among us who does not cherish the memories of our favorite movies from childhood? These motion pictures may have been captivating, awe inspiring, romantic, informative, scary, or even may have transported us to another reality – the world of science fiction, of wonderland, of Camelot, of swashbuckling unlawful behavior, or of Over the Rainbow. Movies sometimes provoked our curiosity, titillated, exhilarated, precipitated dreams of grandeur and accomplishments, bewildered, or offered us escape from a tawdry, less interesting, less spectacular reality.

In this intriguing volume, talented, ebullient editor Mary Banks Gregerson brings together a collection of creative authors who are experts in various genre and usages of film. These contributing authors use films instructively and constructively in their adult professional lives in a significant number of ways – including but not limited to providing ideas and options for individuals they are treating, mentoring, coaching, or teaching; offering images of others who might be facing similar problems or situations and affording the chance for those they are working with to observe and grapple with how others problem-solve, cope, and perhaps triumph; offering opportunities to hear different perceptions that are more positive and lead to greater self-actualization; recommending films that are motivational and inspiring and ever so much more. It becomes evident that films can be utilized throughout the life cycle with patients and consultees from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, racial, religious, ethnic, and educational backgrounds and those from the full panoply of biopsychosocial types of families and communities.

Those teaching courses in film making approach films through yet another lens – that of what makes a film interesting and admirable visually – and also through sound effects as well as through the plot and story line. The script writer, producer, director, costumer, set designer, actors, etc., all work together to convey certain ideas or messages; to provoke thoughts or influence attitudes; or to instill views on different aspects of the world. The viewer may go to be entertained, enlightened, informed, distracted, or simply to enjoy or be transformed.

Media psychologists and life coaches want to know how to use films most efficaciously in their work. Films can be rich adjuncts to therapy and provide excellent stimulus for in-session discussions. This compelling volume offers some
suggestions and commentaries with luminosity, humor, and wisdom – even alchemy and magic. Perhaps you have your own accrued wisdom to add to the stunning mix.

Media psychologists’ interest in the informational, motivational, and inspirational value of films and their potential to create distortions as well as to broaden world views also leads them to engage in other significant roles. Some serve as consultants to producers and directors of films on development of characters so that the characters are realistic as well as vital and interesting, or on their portrayal of psychologists and other therapists so that these depictions are more accurate and scripted to fall within ethical professional guidelines. Other psychologists help those coordinating film festivals to select high-quality, meaningful films that are congruent with the purpose of the festival and/or serve as discussants on the films; it is imperative that they be astute in the analysis of human behavior and of relationships.

Division #46 (Media Psychology) of the American Psychology Association is proud to add this zesty treatise as the third volume to its book series on *Psychology and the Media*.

Without further ado, we now lift the curtain on Movie Magic and the indomitable search for living “happily ever after” in positive psychology land. Enjoy the cinematic journey on which you are about to embark.

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Story Board: The “Filmist” Fall of the Cinematic Fourth Wall

Mary Banks Gregerson

Abstract An invisible cinematic fourth wall separates the audience and the performances. A new approach to film appreciation that capitalizes upon the dissolution of this celluloid fourth wall is the “filmist” approach. For filmists, the stimulus (movie) fades into the background, and their responses (appreciation) take center stage. Films stir life, like modern day fairy tales, to provide templates for living. Using special guidelines, filmists relax, focus, and, later, discuss their reactions with others to magnify the value they receive from film viewing. Movies, like magic, cinematically “color in” for clients’/students’ imagined happy futures – filling in the fairy-tale ending typically left to fantasy with the phrase “… happily ever after….” Postmodern critics of positive psychology command adding the pessimistic realism of “… or not…” to the traditional romanticized fantasy ending. The many chapters in this edited volume illustrate particular themes to assist therapy, coaching, or teaching that is amplified with the filmist approach to breach the cinematic fourth wall for “happily ever after…” or not.” Cinematic artistic expression infiltrates clients’ and students’ lives, melding fantasy with reality. The range of what is possible expands with both the integration of celluloid realities into actual living and also the mirrored reflection of real living in cinematic performances and portrayals. Cinema mirrors reality, and reality contours cinema.

The “Filmist” Fall of the Cinematic Fourth Wall

Reciprocal Relations

An invisible cinematic fourth wall separates audience and performances. This “wall” mirrors reality. The mirror is not one way whereby the audience only sees...
through the looking glass while the cinematic action unfolds, innocent of the view-
ers’ influence. A two-way communication occurs – films influence viewers and
viewers influence films. Reflection from the cinematic mirror indelibly refracts upon
both the viewer and the players.

This new approach to film appreciation is the “filmist” approach. The dramatur-
gical convention of a cinematic “wall” falls away when therapy/coaching/education
uses film to touch the lives of clients/students. Viewers and films enter into a recip-
rocal relationship. A filmist influences the cinema as well as being touched ever
more intently when thus viewing.

Using special guidelines outlined within this introduction, filmists relax, focus,
and afterward discuss with others their reactions to magnify the value of film view-
ing. Purposefully, like electric charges arcing through the air from the screen onto
the viewers, filmist connections create bridges of meaning, influence, and energy
between the fantasy portrayed and the reality the audience is living. Films stir life
and mirror living. And, the charge rebounds from the audience back to the screen
for a bidirectional electric transmission.

**The Reach of Films**

Recognition for the import of films comes from many sources. For example, in 2008,
*Time* magazine seriously considered Zhang Yimou, a renowned Chinese filmmaker,
a finalist for *Time* Person of the Year. Since he in 1984 became the ringmaster of the
show, Zhang, a cinematographer, who also began acting in 1986, has made so many
films and received so many awards that the Chinese have nicknamed him the “Award
Winning Expert.” In the summer of 2008, he codirected alongside Zhang Jigang the
Opening and the Closing Ceremonies at the Summer Olympics in Beijing. That
these cultural contributions warrant such singular recognition as *Time*’s considera-
tion for Person of the Year indicates the elevation of film to a heroic level and film
viewing to a potent, moving cultural experience.

**Filmists, and Others**

**Movie Magic**

There is one main difference in being a filmist from a typical film viewer. For
filmists, the stimulus (movie) fades into the background, and the response (appreci-
ation) takes center stage. The viewer is writ large while the film becomes the means
to the end. Actually, it is like entertainment, which has as its primary focus the audi-
ence’s reactions to the stimulus being performed. In cinematherapy, though, healing
and not simple pleasure is the goal writ large. For life coaches, actualization experi-
enced by clients is writ large. For teachers, what is writ large is the relevance of the
 cinematic topic to students’ lives.
This edited volume colors in what is “writ large” for clients and students. Movies, like magic, can “color in” clients’ imagined happy futures – filling in the fairy-tale ending left to fantasy with the phrase “... and they lived happily ever after . . .” balanced in postmodern times with the added message of “... or not . . .” Both clinicians and life coaches may access the value of movie images and research on their effects which, like beacons, may guide clients in getting well and optimizing that wellness. Reciprocal relations add value.

Chapters in this edited volume Films and Psychology select movies for a particular theme, whether pleasant or not. This selection improves films as cogent, creative, and concrete assets valuable as therapy, coaching, and teaching adjuncts. Other chapters speak to the conceptual and policy basis for the psychological use of films and television.

As a prelude, Dr. Florence Kaslow’s prologue soliloquizes about being a filmist. With stage plays, the word prologue means “preface to a play, from the Greek pro-logos, part of a Greek play preceding the entry of the chorus” (Merriam-Webster, 2008). Just so for films, too. So, Dr. Kaslow chimes in her Foreword before the various voices of the chapter authors even begin speaking. Then each chapter voices what happens after the fairy-tale ending “... happily ever after . . .” is uttered, or the leavening agent of “... or not . . .” is added to this sobriquet.

In classic therapy, that moment when “happily ever after” is voiced typically signifies that time of success with life when therapy closes. Movies are like modern day classic fairy tales that are like therapy, coaching, or teaching. Both have the protagonists – in films, the hero and heroine; in therapy and coaching, the client(s); and in teaching, the student(s) – on the precipice of a new life or understanding. This precipice is reached through struggles and triumphs over dragons and other dangers like in-laws, finances, and sex for therapists; goals, barriers, and values for coaches; and concepts, principles, and facts for students. With the birth of a new beginning in life, both fairy tales and therapy/coaching/education leave to the imagination what occurs beyond that sunset.

**Happily Ever After, or Not**

Filmist potential has been available for quite some time. Classic film fairy tales, like The Heiress (1949) and modern movie morality tales like The Painted Veil (2006) reveal character crises resolved positively. Life after the close of the film, though, remains an enigma for the viewer’s imagination. For clients, too, after their character and life crises resolve, what happens as they walk out of therapy/coaching room toward the sunset on a distant horizon? Film images and stories can show what to do, and what not to do, to create a “happily ever after” to avoid “... or not . . .”, and show what happens after the cinematic curtain falls.

Current sober understanding of life reveals that sometimes what happens may not be pleasant. Thus, the “... or not . . .” provides the needed balance to “... an epistemological position that contributes to ‘reality problems’ for positive
psychologists” (Held, 2004, p. 11). As positive psychology critic Held (2004) points out, the initial, almost “pop” psychology message within positive psychology tyrannically eschews realistic assessment of possible unpleasantness. Viewers become Pollyannas, removing further from reality rather than delving deeper into personal realities. Balance is needed to restore and expand reality rather than to cultivate and create fantasy.

A “second wave” of positive psychology replaces rigidly optimistic positive psychology with a more balanced integrative message of realism, so that current positive psychology gives proper due to the virtues of the negativity also (Held, 2004). The recent compendium on positive psychology, *A Psychology of Human Strengths*, by editors Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003a) fielded chapters by the editors, Carstensen and Charles (2003), Cantor (2003), Carver and Scheier (2003), Ryff and Singer (2003), and Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, and Cacioppo (2003). Works like these which delve into unpleasantness as well as positivity right the imbalance of unmitigated pleasantness by many adherents to positive psychology. Pessimism is given its rightful due in the field. So, the entire range of possible happenings after the cinematic curtain falls can be fully expected and explored.

In entertainment, whether cinematic or stage, this curtain closes to create the fourth wall. Yet when the cinematic fourth wall fails to connect fantasy and reality in therapy/coaching/education, the curtain never closes. The reverberations of the staged scenes vibrate into the life of an audience member to create connection, spill over, and paint an enlivening, moving “ever after” larger than the still portrait moment when crisis becomes health.

In modern times, life coaching joins therapy for mental wellness after mental health is restored. This enterprise brushes aside the romanticized ending of “happily ever after.” Life coaching walks alongside the protagonists at the horizon’s edge where the sunset becomes a new day. For those of us thirsting for more of the story, the actualization enterprise of life coaching slakes that dryness. The cinematic fourth wall crumbles, and the curtain stays down while life gushes onward mixing with cinematic reality.

Freeing of energy previously occupied by distress and dysfunction brings renewed vigor, vitality, and truth. Vigor refers to the style of movement, the spring in the client’s step, and the pace of motion. Vitality means the inner sense of engagement with life. Truth spellbinds reality rather than fantasy as actuality becomes more daring, more satisfying, and more direct. Life becomes so absorbing that retreat to an inner reality pales in comparison in intent, attraction, and result. Life is the “more.”

This edited guide is for mental health/wellness professionals who want more, who want visions that “more” may mean not just the absence of distress and dysfunction. These clients/students want to know what this phrase means and want to live their lives “happily ever after.” Clinicians, coaches, and educators serve these clients/students.

Now, though, positive psychology extends the mandate to include the time beyond “happily ever after.” An emphasis on the positive, its development, its maintenance, and its growth can easily be conveyed in the stories certain films show.
As these chapters indicate, extant movie guides center on the “sturm und drang” of therapy, getting to the sunset, and omit the upbeat and vibrant world of life coaching beyond the sunset. The sole exception is the new book that analyzes film from a positive psychology perspective (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008).

This recent book by Niemiec and Wedding (2008) focuses on positive psychology and film, and, yet, also magnifies pleasantness with a strengths approach. Now is the time to apply positive psychology to therapy and life coaching, and for positive psychology to emphasize pleasant experiences and overcome unpleasantness for optimal living. For our edited volume, Niemiec has contributed a balanced chapter on international cinema and positive psychology and Wedding has written a postlude. Positive psychology points clinicians into directions after healing, steers life coaches in the basic motivational goals of their enterprises, and orients educators to the entire field. Clinicians, coaches, and educators can access movie depictions of life lessons to optimize the foundations of health whether gained through therapy, or not.

Therapy is not a necessary precursor to life coaching. A client can start from health and simply want assistance to actualize “more” in life. Although life coaching is a marvelous sequel to therapy, life coaching exists independently, too. Education in positive psychology encompasses both these enterprises. This volume will not address the professional controversies and parsimonious dovetailing that exist between therapy and coaching, rather, it will provide a common ground for those conducting therapy and for those conducting life coaching as well as educators teaching both by applying psychology to film.

**Beyond “Happily Ever After”**

Much of the “beyond happily ever after” realm is ineffable. Fairy tales rarely show the living after the story’s positive resolution – with the modern exception of the animated movie series *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), and *Shrek 3* (2007). The popularity of this animated series may indicate that the audience now wants to see what happens beyond “happily ever after.”

Fong (1997) delved into Bettleheim’s fascination with the enchantment of fairy tales. He noted, “... the happy endings of fairy tales serve as a substitute of the wishes and dreams of readers. In other words, they satisfy readers’ spiritual wants” (p. 1). Bettleheim (1976) believed that fairy tales allowed readers, young and old alike, to emotionally grow through the gentler mode of symbolism rather than the harshness of realities.

For our edited volume, movies selected that are relevant for a target theme like father–son relationships can dispel this ineffability. For example, mother–daughter relationships find expression in *Postcards from the Edge* (Nichols, 1990), *Mommie Dearest* (Perry, 1961), *Steel Magnolias* (Ross, 1989), while *I Never Sang for My Father* (Cates, 1970), *Liar, Liar* (Shadyac, 1997), and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Benton,