

# The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching

Mary Banks Gregerson  
Editor

# The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching

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# Foreword

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

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Dedicated to my husband Christopher Gregerson for his instrumental interest and support during the years this book evolved, and to my friends, family, and pets Takahata (Tips) and Suburo (Andy) for their loyalty, companionship, and inspiration.

through the looking glass while the cinematic action unfolds, innocent of the viewers' 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 dramaturgical 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 reciprocal 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 viewing. 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 consideration 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 (appreciation) 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 audience's reactions to the stimulus being performed. In cinematotherapy, though, healing and not simple pleasure is the goal writ large. For life coaches, actualization experienced 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 filmmaker. With stage plays, the word prologue means “preface to a play, from the Greek *prologos*, 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***

Filmmist 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 Bettelheim’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). Bettelheim (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,

1979) show perfect examples of various father–son film relationships. Clients and students can examine what should happen and what should not.

This ineffability made describable through movie images can seem like magic. That is, it seems like magic until science identifies effects and their mechanisms as well as other parameters like population and gender influences. Science anchors such magic in reality.

## Science Forms the Field

This edited volume weds science with media film analysis to provide a consummate evidence-based guide for clinicians, coaches, and any learned reader. Now is the time for science to chime in with media analysis. Media scientists need to dispel myths, parse antecedents and consequences, and identify mechanisms to develop the necessary scientific evidence base. In this volume, Walker and her colleagues write about myths of mental illness perpetuated by films. What research evidence exists is presented, with future directions of inquiry clearly articulated. No “happily ever after” vagueness is allowed in the world of science. Mental health scientists want to know how it happens, why it happens, what will make it not happen, and when it will stop naturally.

This edited volume is the first step to transform an essentially clinical and conceptual approach into an evidence-based intervention strategy. When this evidentiary base amasses, the strength of science will anchor all of the other current guides steeped in clinical experience and analytical judgment. With science in the field of film and psychology, a first step need be taken.

First, hypotheses need to be formulated. For this stage, we look to those experienced in the field, and those already making clinical judgments. Their perspectives may provide the first direction for science to move. So, this edited volume turns to clinical experts in various aspects of psychology and film, including those already mentioned, that is, Niemiec and Wedding, as well as Walker and her colleagues. Gregerson turns to scenes of adolescence depicted in movies to comment on the collapse of this rite of passage in American culture. Kuriansky and her colleagues write about the psychology of relationships as shown in film, and American studies specialist Cashill deconstructs modern Californian culture as it reflects/molds visions of the family in films. Balter articulates how those with disabilities are portrayed. Kalayjian and Finnegan Abdolian focus on portrayals of trauma in films. Lanning and his colleagues report on the series of documentaries that follow a group of people over the course of their lives. Wolz provides a conceptual framework with a wealth of clinical and coaching applications. Finally, Ondrusek comments on the interface between television enterprises like reality series and films while critiquing the contributions of authors. These experts have the exciting mandate to spearhead the formation of the scientific field investigating movie adjuncts relevant to clinical treatment programs and life coaching enterprises.

## Cinematotherapy: State of the Art

Currently, many clinicians instinctively reach for the stimuli of popular films and movies to bolster therapy initiatives. In such film fantasies, clients can experientially “learn” possibilities for behavior, emotions, or thoughts. Such movies “magically” guide clinicians and life coaches to transform clients’ visionary aims into concrete realities.

To reiterate an earlier metaphor, these film images can “color in” the fairy tale “happily ever after” fade out found at the end of many fairy tales, so that clients view “real” possibilities. For instance, films like:

- *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967; Caucasian and African-American), *Lone Star* (Sayles, 1996; Caucasian and Hispanic), and *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, Huneck, & Pfeiffer, 1990; Caucasian and Native American) can explore biracial liaisons.
- Other theme examples are blended families shown in *Step Mom* (Columbus, 1998, another woman replacing birth mother), *The Family Stone* (Bezucha, 2005, dying mother irreplaceable while brood adds spouses and children), *Cheaper By the Dozen* (Levy, 2003) and *Cheaper By the Dozen 2* (Shankman, 2005; the courtship and remarriage of two widowed adults, each with a brood of six), *On Golden Pond* (Rydell, 1961; young divorcée with young child remarries single spouse), and *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father* (Cooper, H., Senensky, R., Bixby, B., Komack, Falk, Nelson, Weis, & Sweeney, 1963; young son of a widower matchmakes for his father).
- Still another series of movies addresses identity formation for youths as seen in *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981; the clash of religious and sports values defines young men), *Sky High* (Mitchell, 2005, young man belatedly discovers superpowers inherited from superhero parents), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan, 1962, children catapult into young adulthood through social shunning and dangers that their father experiences when living his egalitarian values), *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995, young girl learns her values independent of and defined by her social set), *Babe* (Noonan, 1995) and *Babe: Pig in the City* (Miller & Paris, 1998, animated, young pig surprisingly excels when assuming the social role of sheepdog), *Good Will Hunting* (van Sant, 1997, professors discover mathematics genius school custodian and socialize him via psychotherapy), and *Say Anything* (Crowe, 1989, young man with modest goals courts and wins young woman with lofty career and personal ambitions).

As noted earlier, “happily ever after” is the actual beginning of the motivational trek to maximize positive functioning. Without any reference point for their desired outcomes, clients may flounder rather than experience efficient, directed progress. Movies can provide such an orienting reference point. Movies and films like *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick, 2002), and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muccino, 2006) can show clients a positive future after triumphing over adversity.

A growing legion of books on psychology and movies indicates the time is here for such books as *The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching*.

A coterie of books (see the bibliography section of “Other Films and Psychology Books”) already appeals to the clinician’s healing mission. Furthermore, a respectable smorgasbord of self-help books centers on film and movies.

Each of these books truncates the visionary goals at healing negativity, that is, bringing the dysfunctional and wounded to the minimum thought to be healthy. None show how health transforms into wellness. So, a guide useful for both clinicians and coaches would add positive visions of wellness beyond simple health as well as update what is apropos for healing and transformation that is readying to morph into wellness.

A small group of wellness and movie books for the general public have just started appearing (see “Movies and Wellness for the General Audience” section). These books motivate, stimulate, and inspire with a learned, but nontechnical, non-scientific psychology presentation. Thus, the professional clinician and learned life coach may find these presentations less than satisfying.

### ***Other Film Guides for the Clinician***

Over the last decade, the number of film guide books appropriate for clinicians has burgeoned (see the bibliography section “Other Films and Psychology Books”). This reverse annotated chronology notes the authors, date of publication, title, edition number, and the publishers.

Both clinician and life coach should be able to access positive psychology in movie images to move clients’ optimizing toward wellness. Now they cannot. To reiterate, none of these film therapy books and those noted subsequently aim at either positive psychology, until Niemiec and Wedding’s 2008 volume, or at the wellness impulse of life coaching.

None embrace science either. And, when science is omitted, then lore, intuition, and experience provide a less technically based and a more opinionated guide. This currently opinion-based field of literature calls for the evidence-based popular psychology oriented guide, *The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching*.

A general public interested in self-help and movies has emerged (see the citations in the reference list section “Other Films and Psychology Books”). *The Cinematic Mirror for Psychology and Life Coaching*. Each entry in this series of books seems approximately equally and respectably popular. The Amazon search engine indicates that many buyers have purchased more than one book in this series.

In the past 5 years a smaller number of books aimed at wellness in relation to film topics have just started to appear (see the reference section “Other Films and Psychology Books”). Popular books such as these capitalize on the large part of life that movies occupy for many people. To wit, US films provide the majority of home entertainment products (MPAA, 2008). In 2006 and 2007, a steady 603 new films were released in more than 150 countries worldwide, and provide the majority of home entertainment.

Books about movies for a purpose other than entertainment beneficially and blissfully co-opt the films’ pleasure motive. As the field of film and psychology moves into a stage of scientific inquiry, the systematization of these various non-intended aspects may magnify their value. To repeat an earlier injunction: “We want to know how it [movie magic] happens, why it happens, what will make it not happen, and when it will stop naturally.” The use of popular movies to heal and to optimize positively extends their value.

To summarize, none of these wellness books systematizes wellness nor provides a scientific evidence base. A positive psychology model emerging from within this current edited book and the Niemiec and Wedding 2008 volume could give scientifically studied concepts as guideposts. An evidence base would examine the experientially proven words both clinicians and life coaches now offer clients on film images relevant to specific life challenges. Finally, the ability and opportunity to talk about what is seen in the film extends its value.

## Who the Readers Are

Life coaches have professional organizations like IDEA, a health and fitness professional association. IDEA has over 19,000 members worldwide. Organizations and associations like CanFitPro (Canadian Fitness Professionals) and training institutions like Bakara Center for Creative Change provide Certified Life Coach Trainings. Such sources access books on life coaching.

In addition, those who also purchased the popular cinematherapy books, some of which are in their second printing, will find this edited volume of interest. For instance, the American Psychological Association (APA) has over 150,000 members with sometimes as many as 20,000 attending the annual conference; APA hosts a huge onsite bookstore there. Many years, films of psychological import are shown through the auspices of the APA Film Committee, and an award is given annually to an outstanding film through the auspices of the APA Division 46 Media Psychology committee called The Media Watch. This edited volume could serve as an excellent source book.

Within APA, Division 46 Media Psychology specifically has an interest in movies and their utilization in promoting health. At the 2006 APA Annual Meeting in New Orleans, LA, the APA Division 46 symposium on “Media, Myth, and Mental Illness” received a deluge of e-mailed and phoned requests for cosponsorship. The Walker and colleagues’ chapter in this volume elaborates upon this popular presentation. The entire volume itself is a part of the APA Division 46 Media Psychology Book Series: *Psychology and the Media* with the Editor-in-Chief Florence W. Kaslow, Ph.D., ABPP. Books in this APA published series include:

Kirschner, S., & Kirschner, D. (Eds.). (1972). *Perspectives on psychology and the media*.

Schwartz, L. L. (1999). *Psychology and the media: A second look*.

So, few books until now applied positive psychology for both clinicians and life coaches in terms of films and psychology. The systematic reviews based around specific topics demonstrate the strategic approach when using film in consultation sessions, whether clinical or coaching. Whatever scientific information is gleaned, still, all this data rests upon the process in which clients engage, whether in therapy or life coaching.

The process of viewing films has an august history in film appreciation. A more than 80-year-old pedagogical approach called “cinema education” has been used for a range of teaching – from a skill like bowling to neuroscience medical education (Alexander, Pavlov, & Lenahan, 2007; Low, 1925; Meyers, 2006). The cognitive behavioral approach presented in this introduction could add value for every single viewing for educational purposes.

This introduction “Story Board: The Fall of the Cinematic Fourth Wall” concludes with a suggested approach of über-appreciation. Because learned lay persons and not professionals are the target audience, this presentation of the approach will foster the cultivation of films, as Niemiec and Wedding (2008) have termed the process.

Belief in the power of movies and television to transform has captured the popular imagination. In last year’s *Transformers* (Bay, 2007), heroic alien robots, called Autobots, learned to communicate with fleshlings, as earthen humans were called, by watching classic films and television. Ten years before, in the docu-fantasy *Elvis Meets Nixon* (Arkush, 1997), an ingenuously adrift Elvis says he never thought beyond the ending of his many movies when he kissed the girl and they lived happily ever after; he is at a loss in terms of his life direction now that he has won career accolades, kissed his girl (wife Priscilla Presley), and they have walked off into the sunset. A conscious turn toward movies as guides for living, as lights illuminating into the darkness of the future, could enrich not only the passage but also the destination.

Years ago at the 2006 American Psychological Association in New Orleans, I presented the first talk on becoming a “filmist.” This approach applies mindfulness (Lanager, 1990) to film viewing. In short, mindful filmists consider a multiplicity of meanings, based upon predetermined choices. Being a filmist means getting the most out of your movie experience.

A filmist watches movies like an artist paints pictures. The movie experience becomes the canvas inside the viewers. Such creativity cultivates meaning, appreciation, and value.

## **On Being a Filmist**

Ever walk out of a film and want the experience to continue? How about simply walking out before the film ended? Has a second screening made a first film viewing richer? Then, you have the makings of a filmist.

Movies. How can we get more for our money with movies on the big or little screen? How? – Watch actively, yet effortlessly. Be a filmist.

A filmist “devours” movies, digesting them in conversation with friends and family after viewing while alertly relaxed, like a hunter awaiting a prey. So a filmist does not just “go” to a film, but rather, a filmist “does” a film. This “doing” involves choice before going, alert yet passive attention while viewing, and then discussion afterward.

### ***Dramaturgy: The Art of Storytelling***

The discussion after the film is the *pièce de resistance* for the filmist. A discussion guide under development called *The Filmist* forms the basis for a Friends Film Social Club for filmists. Based upon screen-writing principles called dramaturgy, this 12-month guide overall provides consummate movie viewing. Yet each month stands alone in its value and purpose. Both the year and monthly topics provide a foundation for discussion, for socializing among filmists. These 12 months of Elements for filmists in a social club are as follows:

#### Character

- The Signature
- Internal Conflict
- Fatal Flaw

#### Plot

- The Goal
- The Barrier
- The Struggle

#### Scene

- Sight
- Sound
- Special Effects

#### Relationship

- Romance
- Family
- Friend/Nemesis

Each element has an explanation, illustrations, and applications so that a range of readers might access this socializing feature. The cohesion of the Filmist Social Club is the process of *SEEing* (see below), while the satisfaction and the outcome are at once individual and interpersonal. A group of filmists mix individual experiences through the funnel of a single elemental focus to stimulate a foundation for discussion and discovery together.

And the Moral of this Tale is: *SEEing Brings Home a Film’s Meaning*

Prepare first. Three basic steps help the viewer *SEE* instead of just watching films.

- ✓ Start with a blank screen.
- ✓ Establish what will be important – that is, the focus of attention.
- ✓ Express to others your response to the particular dramaturgy, or technique of dramatization/comedy of interest.

Again, although the parsimony of this approach appears simple, its application is not easy. We are entrained to experience films as entertainment – to absorb ourselves in plots, in relationships, in aesthetic judgments. Filmists rise above these mundane entertainment involvements. Filmists brush aside these common experiences in order to heighten satisfaction, cultivate comprehension, and maximize value.

### ***Set a Blank Screen: A Tabula Rasa***

Clear your mind of all other thoughts, concerns, musing, and preoccupation. I find helpful envisioning in my mind’s eye a blank, white movie screen like those used for viewing home movies or school films. Then my imagination controls what plays on the screen, how fast, whether moving forward or back, or even stopped as in a portrait. In essence, I become my own movie director.

This “blanking” is not easy. An activity typically used for entertainment changes to an activity for educational enhancement. Instead of being drawn along plot lines and character relationships, the filmist abstracts from the viewing details specifically predetermined as the most important. This transformation takes effort, dedication, and practice. The rewards are great.

A trick to setting a blank screen is a mindfulness technique (Lanager, 1990) combined with diaphragmatic deep breathing (Borysenko, 2008). Mindfulness actively processes experiences and considers multiple possible paths, multiple possible outcomes, and multiple possible meanings. Diaphragmatic breathing relaxes the body so that the active mindfulness progresses unimpeded. This combination of relaxing the body and mind, then focusing the mind for creative “audiencing” magnifies bottom-line enjoyment and top-shelf satisfaction.

### ***Establish What Is Important***

Ironically for filmists, the focus of one’s attention occurs based upon preconceptions. This predetermined focus, either by the filmist her/himself or by the filmist social viewing group, culls from the movie what aspects to include in one’s subsequent movie responses. If you are on a personal odyssey, then decide your destination yourself. If, though, viewing as a member of a group, say a friendship social film viewing club (Gregerson, 2006), then establish collectively what is important, that is, what the group’s destination will be. Like a sieve or a magnetic net which catches pertinent images, information, relationships, plots, and characteristics, this focus establishes beforehand what is important.

*Express to Others: “‘To Be or Not To Be’ That Is the Question”* (Shakespeare, circa 1600).

This step is crucial to complete the filmmaker experience. Talk to others. Express your experience, discuss whether:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them?

(William Shakespeare,  
 Hamlet, circa 1600).

Take your response on the inside and bring it out. Talk and listen. The talking and the listening deepen the experience.

When you know how to appreciate, what to appreciate, and how to make it personally relevant, you will be a filmmaker. You will SEE differently. Your destination will be different than the usual audience member floating along the entertainment train. You will have a special basis for communicating to others. After this easy yet challenging skill starts, its development deepens each time the skill is used.

Two steps precede and one step follows the movie experience.

But what of the movie viewing experience itself? Finally, after the “S” and “E” of, respectively, setting a blank screen and establishing what’s important, relax, and let go while you watch, readying yourself for the subsequent “E” to express yourself. Afterward, talk to your friends, communicate your experiences, and discuss your impressions to intensify the original value of the movie viewing.

### ***More for Your Investment***

Think of being a filmmaker as wise investing. Choose wisely which movie and where in that movie, to invest your attention; then sit back, watch it, and experience enjoyment magnify when communicating with others. This filmmaker experience is your ticket to value, your passport to meaning, and your certificate for appreciation.

The enjoyment is in easy viewing – enriched by the deciding, enlivened by the discovery, enhanced by the sharing.

When you talk with others before and after the film different experiences occur.

Before the film, you create a “frame” or context which will draw out certain aspects of the film to the forefront. These particular aspects will play over in your mind, your emotions, and your body, all of which are at rest because you set the blank screen.

What sticks will comprise the discussion after viewing. And, what sticks is that unique combination of who you particularly are with your one-of-a-kind experiences and of the pre-viewing context that you as a member of your group chose.

The pre-chat is like knotting a skein to catch fish. The caught fish are the images, the thoughts, the experiences culled from the actual viewing which is the preparation. The absorption comes from discussing with other through expression, like eating the fish at a shared banquet. The post-chat mixes your fishes with your friends' fishes to make quite a feast!

Ah, the secret is in the calming, deciding, expressing.

A filmist is like a movie viewing Sherlock Holmes, a subtle, poised, confident detective that astounds the casual viewer by directed focus that "outs" nuances hidden to others, and, then, harvests meaning.

Being a filmist gives a new meaning to the injunction "Go forth, and multiply." Multiply the value of your movie tickets. Multiply the meaning of the viewing experience. Multiply the things you have in common with others. Even if you differ in the meaning extracted, you will find common ground in the process. You all will be filmists.

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# Act One: Introduction

Frank S. Pittman III

**Abstract** It has been said that we go to the movies to fall in love. We know that is true and we fall in love regularly with an enormous screen there in the dark. But we also go to the movies to get wisdom about how life works, to predict the future, to learn how to see what is over the next hill, and what is down the next road. For a lifetime, I have looked to the movies for lessons in reality. But none of these sources of the immortal myths and legends by which we structure our lives could compare in reality or in mythic moment with what was taking place as the pictures and stories and faces – never forget the faces – were transferred from the big screen to the even bigger screen in my head.

We have to look quite a way back to find films about families who are earnestly trying to get along, rather than trying to decide whether it will make them happy to remain in the family with their loved ones. Even if no one else does so, at least the therapists must believe that people have the power to make relationships work, to pull together in times of crisis, and to actually live together without driving one another crazy. The primary skill of therapists is optimism, the belief that we humans can change and do whatever needs to be done for our life and for the lives of our loved ones.

It has been said that we go to the movies in order to fall in love. We know that is true and we fall in love regularly with an enormous screen full of Cyd Charisse, Laurence Olivier, Susan Sarandon, Sophia Loren, Meryl Streep, Morgan Freeman, or Gene Kelly, there in the dark. But we also go to the movies to get wisdom about how life works, to predict the future, to learn how to see what is over the next hill, what is down the next road. For a lifetime, I have looked to the movies for lessons in reality.

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## My Life at the Movies

I grew up in a series of small Southern Gothic towns with an alcoholic mother, a father off at war, two adoring grandmothers, one the editor of the daily newspaper, the other the undertaker and church organist. What's more, we had a cemetery full of kinfolk, each with a story or two. When I was not listening to family stories at my grandmothers' knees, I went down the street to the movies. My first job was delivering fliers for the local picture show. To me, the movies were far more real than the life my family was living in their decaying antebellum mansions with little or no inside plumbing. It was an ideal stage setting for earthy romantic fantasy.

My mother's cousin Charles, with whom she had been raised, had run the pentathlon in the 1920 Olympics, had won a Rhodes Scholarship and the Metropolitan Opera Auditions, and had gone to Hollywood hoping to play Ashley in *Gone with the Wind*. He didn't get the role but he did get on with the telephone company for a while. Mother would send him \$50 every Xmas and he would send her a letter about the famous elbows he had rubbed. Hollywood became part of our neighborhood.

I was 2 when *Snow White* (Disney, 1937) came out and the wicked stepmother scared the BeJesus out of me; I was 4 when I nestled in my Mammy's lap in the balcony to see *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), which I still insist is real, more real than either Kansas or Oz in 1939. I learned compassion from the Joads trying to get from their dust bowl in Oklahoma to the gardens of California. I learned morals and character from *Hopalong Cassidy* (Bretherton, 1935), whose real last name (Boyd) was that of my most loving grandmother. All the war movies fighting it out in my mind starred my missing father; all the love stories starred my once beautiful mother.

I wrote movie reviews in college at Washington and Lee, another mythical atmosphere, and even took courses (from a mentor I shared with Tom Wolfe) on how to watch movies. For 4 years, I did not miss a single flick that came to either theater in the little college town or the theaters at any of the surrounding towns.

In medical school, I was busy and became an amateur movie goer. In time I became a doctor and a husband to another dedicated moviegoer. We could go to the movies again.

I went into psychiatry, of course, perhaps to learn what a normal life was like. I ignored the bloodless diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Instead, I read Freud, whose case histories were something between novels and mysteries. (Freud and Sherlock Holmes had more in common than cocaine.) I came to see that I could be more helpful to people when we had together turned their life or situation into a story, as the causes and effects in their lives roll around and enwrap one another. We explored the forces that impacted or determined the things people did, how they came to do them, where they picked up the misinformation about the human condition that would make their self-defeating behavior make sense within the context of their family, their town, and perhaps even within the context of the movies they had seen or the novels they had read.

Interestingly, much of the misinformation people carry through life was picked up from self-help books written by well-meaning people who just hadn't lived enough life yet to understand how complex it can be, and how simple.

As psychiatry did in those days, our primary goal was to convince people that whatever their parents had told them or modeled for them was well intentioned, even if stark raving mad. Only if people know what other people feel in life can they be compassionate or optimistic or effective in negotiating the interactions of their lives on the same planet with other human beings. One thing that was inescapably clear was that those people, usually men, who read the sports pages but have rarely if ever read fiction, have bypassed the crucial experience of knowing what life feels like to people outside themselves. They may go to movies in which people on screen don't talk much to one another, while the audience is kept awake by glass shattering and things exploding.

This was of course long before television got to our neck of the woods. When it did come in, I was grown and gone. (My parents then kept several TV's blaring around the clock, stopping all the conversation that made life with them feel like someone was alive there.) We could watch the little TV screen and see competitive seductions, contests about who would get the girl (or the guy). Around the clock we watched bad guys chase good guys, and good guys chase bad guys, and we might ponder who would live and who would die. Most of the plots were familiar from the polygamous and bloodthirsty Old Testament. Between burning bushes and man-eating whales, brothers killed brothers and fathers killed sons, and kings killed the husbands of the women they lusted after. Sick people got well and bad people got caught and everyone good lived happily ever after.

My hobby is writing movie reviews. For 25 years, my reviews have appeared in the *Psychotherapy Networker* (formerly *The Family Therapy Networker*) with reviews of – or at least comments about – 450 movies. In these reviews I try to underline what the moviemakers are trying to say and trying to do. I want to identify what the movie is showing us, what effect it is having upon us, and what it tells us about the human condition, about the relationships of human beings in their natural state. I may be making some use of the hours I've spent in the dark thinking about what sort of creatures we are and what we are doing to one another when we act out the scripts we have been given, directly or inadvertently, in our families.

In therapy, patients and I talk about the messages from the movies. When I teach, I show or explain or even act out scenes from movies that demonstrate the interaction or the emotions people go through in life.

## **Marriage: The Mysteriously Fragile Institution**

We talk a lot about marriage, the institution that confuses us most. Marriage in recent decades has somehow become the most fragile of our human institutions. It is not holding and therefore children are growing up with single parents, if any at all, and are failing to grow into adults. It is a disaster for all of us. Children who grow up without fathers do not understand what grown men are about; they cannot become one and they cannot choose one. They may actually think that women who run from marriage are showing great maturity and courage. Yet they somehow have

confidence that, once they get rid of this imperfect husband, they can go to the “perfect husband store” and pick up a shiny new one.

Boys growing up without fathers may become male impersonators, exaggerating the display of masculinity it takes to look like a man. Boys who grow up fatherless are many times more likely to end up imprisoned for violent crimes, jumping from marriage to marriage and running out on kids, terrified of an equal relationship with a female partner.

Marriage is not likely to work if you don’t understand it and instead expect a totally different sort of arrangement, like a high romance or a suicide pact.

The most important things we need to know about marriage are, first, that “Marriage is not marriage unless both partners are working to make it equal, total, and permanent” and, second, that “Marriage is not supposed to make you happy: it is supposed to make you married and thus bring coherence into your life.”

We are supposed to learn such things about marriage from our parents, grandparents and siblings, but our families, even if they manage to stay together and don’t kill one another, protect us from unpleasant reality and hide things from us. Unfortunately we learn about marriage from romantic fantasies, from pornography, or from Cialis 4-hour erection ads. (I don’t know which is worse in raising people’s expectations too high.) Perhaps the worst source of information about marriage would be romance novels. Interestingly, the best place to learn about men, women, and marriage might be women’s magazines.

Television is not a reliable source of insight about what it takes to make a marriage work. The day time talk shows tend to be impatient with imperfect men or indecisive women and they want to get it over with fast, “Leave the jerk! You deserve better. Put the children up for adoption, they’ll be fine. Think of what will make you happy, right this minute. All women are in danger of being romantically disappointed or verbally abused, so you should surely run away from your home and your loved ones.”

Television also tends to dumb marriage down for us, so we must go to the movies to get a close-up, bigger than life, picture of the horrors and splendors of the blessed and cursed state of marriage. There are certain movies that radiate such wisdom, everyone needs to know and understand them. There are many of them, but here are a few I often present to therapists and patients.

## **Romance and Suicide**

*Wuthering Heights* (Wyler, 1939) was made from the broodingly romantic novel of 1847 by Emily Bronte. This film makes romance seem dangerous, deadly, and doomed – somewhat of a suicide equivalent. It dramatizes and debunks the notion that marriage has something to do with high romance and soul mates. Narcissistically romantic Cathy (Merle Oberon) is about to marry the rich guy next door (David Niven) but she is in love with the gypsy foundling Heathcliff (Laurence Olivier), with whom she’s been raised and now who is the family stable boy. Oberon demands that Heathcliff “Make the world stop right here. Make the world stand still.

Make the moors never change. Make you and I never change.” Heathcliff says “The moors and I will never change. Don’t you, Cathy.” Her response is “No matter what I ever say or do, Heathcliff, this is me standing here on this hill with you forever.” In other words, “do not let the future happen, since our love would not survive all that reality. We cannot marry therefore our choices are to suicide or to live in misery.” Sure enough, she goes ahead and marries David Niven that afternoon, makes him miserable until she dies and comes back to haunt everyone. Hollywood, forced to offer happy endings to its prospective audience, lets each movie end with true love being requited, so the audience feels a moment of happiness until they stop to think about it.

Woody Allen used to believe in romantic love, yet he let both Jonathan Rhys Meyers playing Chris Wilton in *Match Point* (Allen, 2005) and Martin Landau playing Judah Rosenthal in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Allen, 1989) escape punishment for murdering their mistresses. In a recent Woody Allen film, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Allen, 2008), the still more or less married Spanish artist and wild man Juan Antonio played by Javier Bardem invites two American tourists, adventurous Cristina done by Scarlett Johansson and the circumspect Vicky done by Rebecca Hall to share his weekend and his bed. They are soon joined by his homicidal ex wife Marcia Elena played by Penelope Cruz, as Bardem regularly changes partners or just adds to the rotation and explains his actions by assuring us he feels like doing it. The landlady Judy Nash played by Patricia Clarkson wants to join the *rondele*, or at least some *rondele*, but restrains herself and instead encourages everyone else to get on the merry-go-round. Allen’s sympathies are clearly with those who make decisions on bases other than the passion of the moment. He, who once was cynical about marriage, now seems to have soured on romance.

Romance is about the measure of true love, i.e., the eagerness to die for it, like *Romeo and Juliet* (Cukor, Castellani, Zeferelli, & Luhrmann, 1936/54/68/96). One of the more outrageously romantic films of my youth was *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor, 1946) in which a good brother Jesse McCaules (Joseph Cotton) and a bad brother Lewton “Lewt” McCaules (Gregory Peck) vie for their dangerous half breed cousin Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones). When she chooses Cotton, Peck shoots him, so Jones shoots Peck, and Peck, after crawling for bloody miles across the desert, shoots her, and they bleed and die together among the cacti – for love.

## The Hill of Beans

As I watch love stories unfold so inevitably, I keep hearing in my head Bogart as Rick’s final words to the love of his life, Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa, at the airport in *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). She is planning to leave her husband, Paul Henreid as Victor Lazslo, the freedom fighter who is the last hope for Western Civilization. Bogey switches the plane tickets and sends Bergman off to help her husband save the world. He tells her, “Ilsa, I’m no good at being noble, but it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you’ll understand that, not now. – But we’ll always have Paris.”