

Character strengths cinematherapy: Using movies to inspire change, meaning, and cinematic elevation

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Abstract

Good movies have the potential to capture a trifecta of meaning: they can be enjoyable, engaging, and empowering. In other words, we experience pleasure, focused attention and concentration, and are inspired toward the good or reach new insights into ourselves, others, or the human condition. Drawing on the rapidly emerging science in character strengths, areas of integration with cinematherapy are outlined and explored. A therapeutic change model for character strengths cinematherapy is discussed, with emphasis on the roles of cinematic elevation and cinematic admiration. Practical suggestions to help therapists match client goals, well-being areas, signature strengths, lower strengths, and psychopathology or problem areas are framed. While integration into large scale projects to impact social change is possible with character strengths cinematherapy, the starting point is helping therapists to use this approach with the client in front of them to promote that change one person at a time.

KEYWORDS

character strengths, cinematherapy, cinematic admiration, cinematic elevation, positive media

"No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls" (Ingmar Bergman).

1 | INTRODUCTION

Good movies have the potential to capture a trifecta of meaning. Meaningful movie experience can be enjoyable, engaging, and empowering. In other words, we experience pleasure, focused attention and concentration, and are inspired toward the good or reach new insights into ourselves, others, or the human condition.

Over the last century, movies have provided an impressive medium for psychological exploration and interpretation. This has been particularly clear in the contexts of applying movies to psychotherapy, known as cinematherapy (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990), and using movies in teaching students, known as cinemeducation (Alexander, Hall, & Pettice, 1994). In cinemeducation, teachers use movies as an adjunct to stimulate discussion, highlight relationship themes, and offer ideas for best practices. Studies have shown movies are an effective pathway for boosting empathy and promoting reflection (Raingruber, 2003). Large scale work has been done with entertainment-education, a promising approach that uses different forms of mass media (e.g., radio, television, films) with positive role models to communicate with groups of people and generate large-scale social and behavioral change (Singhal & Rogers, 2002).

One study showed that movies helped medical students understand ethical issues, develop critical thinking skills, and enhance moral reasoning (Lumlertgul, Kijpaisalratana, Pityaratstian, & Wangsaturaka, 2009). In undergraduate and graduate psychology courses, one of the most popular uses of the film involves teaching students about psychopathology. This typically involves using movies to showcase examples of different diagnostic conditions, the onset and course of mental illness, and the portrayal of other negative psychological phenomena (e.g., relationship conflicts); movies are also used to highlight misconceptions in the field and may offer students opportunities for differential diagnosis and treatment planning discussions (Wedding & Niemiec, 2014).

In the case of cinematherapy, therapists recommend and discuss films with their clients, sometimes catalyzing meaningful change (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Films may offer clients deeper insights into their personality and life dilemmas, capturing the essence of the presenting problem, and facilitating the therapist–client relationship (Berg-Cross et al., 1990). In addition, films can instill hope and motivation, enhance treatment compliance, and help clients speak about sensitive or challenging personal or interpersonal content. “At best, cinematherapy can be a major catalyst for change in psychotherapy; at the very least, it is a valuable tool and useful adjunct to treatment” (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003, p. 214).

Despite multiple possible applications, the dominant trend is to use films to target what is “wrong” in clients. What is far less developed is the use of movies to identify, explore, and promote what is best in human beings—values found in the study of positive psychology. In arguably the largest and most impactful study in this area, 55 scientists spent 3 years investigating what is best about human beings. Following extensive surveying across cultures and countries (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006), interviewing remote indigenous peoples (Biswas-Diener, 2006), and examining the core works of philosophy and religion dating back 2600 years (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005), they uncovered a consensual nomenclature. This common language of 24 universal character strengths, nesting under six virtues, is known as the VIA Classification of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This finding has spurred at least 600 studies on this grouping of strengths (VIA Institute, 2020), as well as a validated measurement tool is taken by over 10 million people referred to as the VIA Survey, or VIA Inventory of Strengths. The acronym “VIA” previously stood for “Values in Action.” However, that was changed in 2006 to the stand-alone term VIA, which has the dual benefit of meaning “the path” or “by means of” in Latin (i.e., these strengths are “pathways” to well-being and other positive outcomes), as well as offering a clearer focus on core character/identity/behavioral action rather than values (which are limited to our thoughts/feelings).

As these universal character strengths have taken scientific root across multiple disciplines (Niemiec, 2019), including psychotherapy (Rashid & Seligman, 2018), the opportunity to meld them more systematically into cinemeducation and cinematherapy are strong. This paper will focus on cinematherapy approaches. The framework for cinemeducation is documented in Niemiec and Wedding’s (2014) work outlining 1500 films and the character

strengths exhibited, the strengths imbalances at play, and the depiction of other positive psychological phenomena in films such as mindfulness, resilience, meaning in life, engagement, and positive relationships.

2 | THE PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS AT THE MOVIES

As therapists venture into character strengths cinematherapy, it is useful to start with understanding what a “positive psychology movie” is. In short, it is one that captures that trifecta of meaning in that it’s enjoyable, engaging, and empowering. More specifically, a positive psychology movie meets four criteria (Niemic, 2007):

1. It contains a portrayal of a character strength;
2. It contains depictions of obstacles, adversity, and/or struggle or conflict the character faces in expressing the strength;
3. It contains a portrayal that illustrates how to overcome these obstacles and build or maintain the strength; and
4. It contains a tone or mood (e.g., “light” or “dark”) that is uplifting or that speaks deeply to the human condition.

For example, consider *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018), in which the title character exhibits substantial strengths of hope/optimism, perseverance, creativity, and perspective, and uses these strengths to overcome adversities such as the pessimism of family members, the impending foreclosure of a house, and the grieving of family members from the loss of the mother figure. This film has a lighthearted tone with catchy, inspiring musical lyrics, in contrast with films with darker tones—films that would not seem to be positive psychology films on the surface but when reflected upon deeply have something meaningful to say about the human condition. Some examples of the latter include *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), *Operation Finale* (2018), *The Hours* (2003), and *A Ghost Story* (2017). Another example comes from Deb (2016) who used the four criteria described above in studying an adolescent Saudi girl in the film *Wadjda* (2012). In short, these criteria offer therapists a framework for conceptualizing character strengths in films and for considering potential applications for use with clients.

As character strengths are part of our personality, and studies show they provide meaning and incremental validity over and above the traditional Big Five personality model (McGrath, Hall-Simmonds, & Goldberg, 2020), a viewer could notice character strengths in any movie character. Character strengths are dimensional rather than categorical phenomena; therefore, a character could show a very small degree of kindness or fairness or leadership. In addition, a character can overuse or underuse their strengths—bringing forth too much curiosity and appearing nosy or exhibiting too little humility and presenting as egocentric; these overuses or underuses then have some negative impact on the character or on others (Niemic, 2019). In addition, character strengths can also be misused which involves the intentional use of strength to harm others. An example is Jake Gyllenhaal's character in *Nightcrawler* (2014) who manipulates others with his creativity, social intelligence, and curiosity.

To date, there has been no formal investigation of the VIA Classification of character strengths in cinematherapy. However, each of the 24 character strengths have been outlined and examined across films elsewhere (Niemic & Wedding, 2014). Table 1 contains a listing of exemplar characters portraying the 24 character strengths.

3 | A CHANGE MODEL FOR CHARACTER STRENGTHS CINEMATHERAPY

To maximize character strengths cinematherapy, therapists help clients access their natural internal processes that can reinforce their character strengths and inspire change. This is framed as a practical model of positive change for character strengths cinematherapy. The client observes a character's strengths in action and this observational learning stimulates a range of feelings, empathic responding, and a sense of connection, which leads the client to positive action (i.e., self-improvement or virtuous behavior benefiting others).

TABLE 1 Examples of the 24 character strengths of the VIA Classification in movies

Film (year)	Character	Virtue category	Character strength exemplar
<i>Freedom Writers</i> (2007)	Erin Gruwell	Wisdom	Creativity
<i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	L. B. Jefferies	Wisdom	Curiosity
<i>The Imitation Game</i> (2014)	Alan Turing	Wisdom	Judgment/critical thinking
<i>The Public</i> (2019)	Stuart Goodson	Wisdom	Love of learning
<i>Whale Rider</i> (2003)	Paikea	Wisdom	Perspective
<i>Frozen</i> (2013) and <i>Frozen 2</i> (2019)	Princess Anna	Courage	Bravery
<i>Bird Box</i> (2018)	Malorie	Courage	Perseverance
<i>Before Midnight</i> (2013)	Celine and Jesse	Courage	Honesty
<i>Trolls</i> (2016)	Poppy	Courage	Zest
<i>The Blind Side</i> (2009)	Leigh Anne Tuohy	Humanity	Love
<i>Won't You Be My Neighbor?</i> (2018)	Fred Rogers	Humanity	Kindness
<i>Juno</i> (2007)	Juno MacGuff	Humanity	Social intelligence
<i>Operational Finale</i> (2018)	Group of Israeli secret agents	Justice	Teamwork
<i>12 Angry Men</i> (1957)	Juror #8	Justice	Fairness
<i>Invictus</i> (2009)	Nelson Mandela and Francois Pienaar	Justice	Leadership
<i>The Straight Story</i> (1999)	Alvin Straight	Temperance	Forgiveness
<i>Peaceful Warrior</i> (2006)	Socrates and Dan Millman	Temperance	Humility
<i>Julie and Julia</i> (2009)	Julia Child and Julie Powell	Temperance	Prudence
<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	Forrest Gump	Temperance	Self-regulation
<i>Wings of Desire</i> (1987)	Damiel	Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty/excellence
<i>Groundhog Day</i> (1993)	Phil Connors	Transcendence	Gratitude
<i>The Burial of Kōjo</i> (2018)	Esi	Transcendence	Hope
<i>Zorba the Greek</i> (1964)	Alexis Zorba	Transcendence	Humor
<i>Run Lola Run</i> (1998)	Lola	Transcendence	Spirituality

A therapist using cinematherapy can emphasize any level of the model when working with a client on character strengths. Clients might be encouraged to observe and study the hero on the screen; pay attention to their own emotions and sense of connection with the character during the film; or monitor and track their behavior and character strengths expressions after watching the film. I next offer details about each of these phenomena.

3.1 | Observational learning

As the father of observational learning, Albert Bandura (1977) explained “Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling. From observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed,

and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). Considering the heavily visual medium of film, the potential for viewers to learn by observing cinematic displays of goodness, virtue, and character strengths are substantial.

The characters in movies can be seen as everyday heroes that are observed and then potentially copied in one way or another. The concepts of “Big H” and “little h” heroism (Farley, 2011) are relevant here. “Big H” heroism involves large scale, fictional portrayals or paragons of strength and have the advantage of being entertaining and engaging for viewers. Films with superheroes with supernatural powers using their abilities to serve others and the greater good would be the classic example of Big H. In addition, there is “little h,” or those everyday role models that viewers see on the screen and connect with. As opposed to films such as *Black Widow* (2020) or *Spider-Man* (2002), viewers might turn to the strong personal actions of Akeelah in *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) as she traverses through numerous adversities in her life. In this vein, “little” does not mean less important or insignificant, it implies more practical and applicable—and oftentimes more relatable—for the viewer. As Franco and Efthimiou (2018) observe, “To truly know ourselves, we must know ourselves at our best” (p. 380). The use of heroism in movies—and the consideration of the character strengths of those heroes and heroines—provides an opportunity for viewers to understand what is best about human beings and learn ways to emulate those traits. With this element of the model, viewers observe characters displaying character strengths and directly imitate the positive behavior/character strength or code this pattern of goodness in their memory for later use.

3.2 | Empathy and connecting

Movies provide a unique vehicle for viewers to emotionally connect with characters on the screen. Research has shown that inspiring media content is a reliable source for the experience of everyday, self-transcendent emotions and is common among people high in gratitude and spirituality (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019). Viewers learn about other cultures, how people of different age, gender, race, context (e.g., family, schools, organizations, community), and country of origin create successes and handle adversity. As viewers observe, learn, and reflect, they let go of their day-to-day concerns and empathic understanding unfolds, creating emotional connections with the characters and the outcomes of the characters' behaviors (Oatley, 2011). Those movies most appreciated tend to be those involving emotional expression at the moment as well as emotions occurring following reflection on the film (Oliver & Bartch, 2010).

Empathy helps the viewer experience that sense of connectedness with others—an understanding, kinship, or alignment with an individual, group, or culture. Media researchers explore this by distinguishing the constructs of identification and transportation. The former involves the viewer sharing the character's knowledge, goals, and emotions, and feeling empathy, affinity/connection, and a union of perspectives with them; the latter involves the viewer fully entering the narrative and temporarily losing access to facts from the real world (Cohen, 2001; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Identification is affected by the viewer's emotional connection to the character while transportation is more affected by suspense in the film.

Another factor in connecting viewers to characters is similarity. Using *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens* (2015), research has shown that participants are more likely to report feeling most connected to characters of a similar gender (Hall, 2019). Imagine the young woman who observes the heroine, Rea, and feels an emotional connection with Rea's personal struggles and her sense of a larger mission. This young woman observes Rea's bravery, zest, and perseverance, all of which can lay the groundwork for future action. Likewise, consider the potential impact of a Black boy who observes the impressive integrity, courage, and hope of Finn, a Black man who dramatically leaves his stormtrooper life behind him and goes to fight for the rebels. Researchers have found that fictional heroes are more likely to be rated higher on heroism scales than nonfictional ones (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The character strengths of these protagonists are on full display for viewers, who already identify and emotionally connect with the movie character, and now have the beginnings of a mental map to inspire their use of

these strengths in their own life. Figure 1 offers a practical model for the positive change that can occur by observing character strengths in action and the empathic connection that ensues.

Character strengths are naturally part of this identification process and can be discovered in the viewer's thoughts and feelings of connectedness with the characters. For example, in reaction to a powerful cinematic portrayal, a viewer might think and/or feel, "We're all in this together" (teamwork), "I understand what was motivating that character's actions" (social intelligence), "I want to do good, just like her" (kindness), and "I want to learn more about that culture depicted in the film" (love of learning). Studies have found that portrayals of moral or good attributes of a character are an important factor in a viewer's connection with a character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). With this element of the model, viewers experience an emotional connection and deeper meaning, inspiring positive thoughts, feelings, and/or actions.

3.3 | Cinematic elevation and cinematic admiration

Niemiec and Wedding (2008) coined the phrase *cinematic elevation* to highlight the powerful potential films have as a force for good. Specifically, in building off the scientific definition of the emotion of elevation (Haidt, 2003), cinematic elevation occurs when the viewer observes a portrayal of goodness or a character strength, in turn, experiences physiological sensations of tingling, warming in the extremities, or a lump in the throat, and then, most importantly, becomes motivated to do good (Janicke & Oliver, 2017; Niemiec, 2012; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012).

Numerous studies have found that elevation can increase the probability of altruistic and prosocial behavior and feeling connected to the transcendent and close relationships; it also predicts higher posttraumatic growth after experiencing trauma (e.g., Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011; Erickson et al., 2017; Landis et al., 2009; Tingey, McGuire, Stebbins, & Erickson, 2017). Many of these studies use clips from inspiring figures, for example, Mother Teresa or Oprah. Consider the example of the Nelson Mandela character portrayed by Morgan Freeman in *Invictus* (2009) who helps unify a nation by inspiring the demoralized South African rugby team. Mandela's honesty, leadership, social intelligence, fairness, and kindness are on full display as he entreats the team to conduct training camps across the racially divided country, treats his staff as equals, and questions the rugby team leader about how the team might be encouraged to be better than they think and be the greatest when nothing else will do. *Invictus* can inspire viewers to use these same character strengths in their own way or be inspired to use other character strengths to do good (Niemiec, 2010).

Admiration—and thereby cinematic admiration—is distinct from elevation/cinematic elevation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Cinematic admiration, in mirroring the science of admiration (Haidt & Seder, 2009), occurs when the viewer observes *nonmoral* excellence or character strengths in a character, feels physiological sensations relating to feeling energized and "chills," and is motivated to improve oneself or copy the model. As is the case for cinematic elevation, there is no precise recipe that states a viewer will experience cinematic admiration by watching a particular film. Each viewer's experience, what they attune to in the film, their own

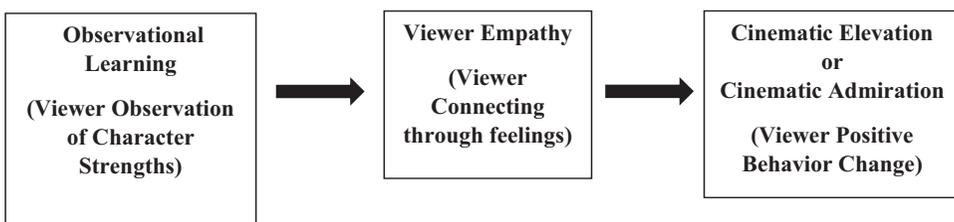


FIGURE 1 A practical model of character strengths activation stimulated by movies

TABLE 2 Everyday examples of cinematic elevation and cinematic admiration

Film (year)	Example	Character strength(s) used
Cinematic elevation		
<i>A Better Life</i> (2011)	I reconnected with my estranged son after 2 years	Humility, forgiveness
<i>Amelie</i> (2001)	I set up a plan to do three random acts of kindness per week	Kindness, prudence
<i>The Straight Story</i> (1999)	I verbalized my responsibility and sorrow for my blaming approach in an argument I had had with my wife	Judgment, honesty
<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> (2004)	I called up several family members and friends the next 2 days to tell them either “I love you” or explain how much they mean to me	Love, hope
<i>The Station Agent</i> (2003)	The next day in school, I started a conversation with a kid who was always alone	Social intelligence, kindness
<i>Patch Adams</i> (1998)	I decided to take on a volunteer role in my community to help others	Kindness, teamwork
<i>The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio</i> (2005)	I began to focus more on my family, being fair to my kids by going to more of their activities and events, instead of all my attention being placed on my work	Fairness, love
Cinematic admiration		
<i>Batman Begins</i> (2005)	I started to face my anxiety for social situations head-on and went to two events I had been avoiding	Bravery, social intelligence
<i>Inception</i> (2010)	I became superproductive at work and in my writings for several days	Perseverance, creativity
<i>To Live</i> (1994)	I looked back at some of my hardships in life and spent time looking for at least one way each had helped me in some way	Perspective, hope
<i>The Revenant</i> (2015)	I tried harder in my dance lessons. Instead of giving up when I felt tired, I kept pushing myself	Perseverance, zest
<i>Midnight in Paris</i> (2011)	I started looking for beauty each time I went outside, no matter what was going on. I feel it helped me to manage my stress better	Appreciation of beauty and excellence, curiosity
<i>Bend it Like Beckham</i> (2002)	I strove to be a better teammate, passing it more and setting up plays for my teammates	Teamwork, leadership
<i>All is Quiet on the Western Front</i> (1930)	I immediately became a vegetarian and kept it up for 70 years	Self-regulation, perspective

personal background, and that which they empathize or connect with, will vary. The research on admiration and cinematic admiration is almost nonexistent at present. That said, some films in which cinematic admiration might be more likely include sports movies such as *Rudy* (1993) and *Remember the Titans* (2000), films about musical prodigies such as *The Soloist* (2009) and *Amadeus* (1984), and other types of genius and creativity as seen in *The Social Network* (2010) and *Temple Grandin* (2010).

Table 2 offers examples of cinematic elevation and cinematic admiration. These examples are unique to each individual person. In some cases, the viewer is inspired to copy, to some degree, the behavior of the character on screen, while in other cases, the portrayal elevates or inspires them to use other character strengths to exert positive change.

For this element of the model, viewers experience elevation or admiration in response to moral or nonmoral excellence and are inspired to positive action that contributes to the greater good or their own self-improvement. This model is the foundation for laying the groundwork for the value and practices of character strengths cinematherapy which is explored in the following sections.

4 | THE PRACTICE OF CINEMATHERAPY

4.1 | Therapeutic options

To best engage a client with movies, a therapist needs to do some preparation. Therefore, I offer four general approaches to character strengths cinematherapy that therapists can consider: formal, spontaneous, together, and homework. This is followed by a discussion of cinematherapy alignment strategies and the integration of character strengths-spotting in movies.

4.1.1 | Formal

A formal approach to character strengths cinematherapy is one that is planned at each step for or with the client. The following stepwise process offers considerations for the therapist using any film to delve into character strengths and foster cinematic elevation or cinematic admiration.

- (1) Introduction: Introduce the concepts of cinematherapy, character strengths, and the positive potential of movies. An important prerequisite here is to have the client take the free, validated test of character strengths—the VIA Survey (www.viacharacter.org)—and begin discussions of his or her signature strengths. Signature strengths are the client's highest strengths that are most energizing, effortless to use, and essential to who the client is (Niemiec, 2018). Randomized controlled studies have found that the intervention, “use a signature strength in a new way each day,” leads to significant gains in happiness, flourishing, and strengths use, and decreases in depression, in some studies for as long as 6 months (see meta-analysis of this intervention; Schutte & Malouff, 2019).
- (2) Selection of film: Prioritize client ideas and selections, when possible. Following the client's passion and interest in choosing a specific film is likely to enhance adherence and engagement in the activity. Some contexts (e.g., the film only available on Netflix) or settings (e.g., psychiatric institutions) may preclude client access. In addition, some client suggestions may be inappropriate, such as a client with posttraumatic stress disorder suggesting a war film when you are using the cinematherapy to process their marital strengths. Cinematherapists need to use their best judgment in each client situation. A number of alignment strategies (methods for therapists to align films in particular ways) are offered in the section that follows these four general approaches.
- (3) Preparation: Discuss the rationale for the particular film for this particular client. Share the optimal approach the client can take to maximally benefit from the film.
- (4) Viewing: The client views the film in its entirety. The therapist views the film if they have not seen it already.
- (5) Discussion/processing follow-up: Before the next session, encourage the client to reflect on the film and its meaning for them. The most important step for many client gains and client changes might not be viewing per se but the discussion/processing step (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2017). This helps the client develop and solidify insights and solutions. This is the step of cinematherapy for therapists to prioritize.

4.1.2 | Spontaneous

This refers to an informal approach to cinematherapy that is “in the moment.” When discussing the client's anxiety or stressors, cinematic applications will emerge in therapists' minds from time to time. In some cases, it will be fruitful for therapists to turn to their own internal repertoire of film examples and consider discussing one or more in a way that matches optimally with the client. To prime this likelihood, therapists might keep a catalog of film

suggestions for clients based on problems, goals, and positive qualities. Therapists do not need to formally recommend such films, as an alternate approach is to use the film as a metaphor, within the discussion. Consider this example of a therapist speaking with a client struggling with family relationships:

Our discussion here about trying to find yourself amidst the turmoil you have going on at home reminds me of one of the characters from the film American Beauty. An older adolescent, named Ricky, was someone who struggled a lot in his relationship with his father. His mother was emotionally unavailable as she suffered from a severe mental illness. Ricky went out in the world taking videos of things he found beautiful. These were things that others would not typically find beautiful such as a dead bird. There's one scene where Ricky finds beauty in a piece of trash. He watches this plastic bag floating—or as he called it “dancing”—in the air. He films it for 15 min. He goes on to say that that is when he discovered “there's this whole life behind things.” Ricky found and used his appreciation of beauty strength. This strength helped him to not only cope with his difficult family life, it helped him to connect with a girl in his class and to express his “true self” with others. I see you as looking to express your best character strengths as well. What do you think?

If this spontaneous sharing seemed to connect for the client, the therapist could quickly find the clip of this scene on YouTube and watch it with the client to accentuate the insights. This could potentially link with the next approach.

4.1.3 | Together

In some situations, a therapist might suggest a viewing of a clip (or short film) together during the session. This might build from the successes of the formal or spontaneous approaches just noted. This “together” approach is generally recommended to those therapists who are film savvy and have stockpiled a range of clips/links on their computer or other devices for easy access. Such therapists will often have several movie clips, across different positive outcomes or character strengths categorized, that are ready to go with a click. For examples of meaningful movie clips, see Niemiec and Wedding (2014). Therapists can also search YouTube for their favorite cinematic portrayals as many positive psychology movies have been broken down into bite-size clips. Be sure to fully review each clip, making note of central themes and character strengths portrayed in each.

4.1.4 | Homework only

Because of the time constraints in watching a film, many therapists choose to use movies as a homework intervention, not unlike bibliotherapy suggestions. Cinematherapy as homework, especially that which involves reflecting, discovering, and using one's character strengths, offers a wonderful opportunity for client self-exploration and journaling.

Niemiec (2018) offered a stepwise intervention called “taking action through movies.” This is based on the construct of cinematic elevation (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008) and research showing that viewing positive psychology movies leads to increases in positive characteristics and positive behaviors as well as a number of indicators of well-being (Smith, 2014; Smithikrai, 2016). Here are some steps in the process:

1. The therapist/client agrees on the client viewing a film the client has access to and that aligns with therapeutic discussion and/or treatment goals.
2. The client is encouraged to watch the movie with an openness to learn, feel, and understand oneself *and* others.

3. For stronger cinematic elevation effects, *before the viewing*, the client is encouraged to journal about the signature strengths and ways he or she has used them recently in positive ways. This addition of affirming personally valued qualities before watching an elevating clip has been shown to lead to greater levels of elevation/helping behaviors (Schnall & Roper, 2011).
4. During the film, and as the credits of the movie roll, the client is encouraged to be present to what is stirring inside him or her. The client should be considering these questions that the therapist has prepared: What do you feel now? What character strengths are bubbling up within you? What motivation toward positive action or strengths use do you notice in you?
5. Clients are encouraged to write down what they are most inspired by from the movie, whether that is a particular character, a dialog or quote, a plot development, an interaction or scene, or a cinematic element such as the scenery, lighting, or music. Then, they are asked to journal about the strengths of the character or those strengths that link with the cinematic element.
6. Clients are asked to then consider a way they might translate one of their observations into action in their personal life.
7. For therapists using this cinematherapy approach, it is critical they ask the client about this homework in the subsequent session and make time to process the experience and impact. Therapists are encouraged to help the client draw connections between the strengths and virtues on-screen to positive ways they can use them in their own life, especially that which relates to treatment goals. If the client did not do the cinematherapy homework but remains motivated, the therapist might explore the obstacles that got in the way and troubleshoot accordingly.

4.2 | Aligning film recommendations

There are a number of considerations in terms of selecting and recommending films for clients. As mentioned in the formal approach, a strong start is to encourage clients to consider films that might be a fit for cinematherapy or that they would like to discuss. The following alignment strategies for character strengths cinematherapy can build off the client selection possibility or can help therapists take the lead in discussing possibilities or making formal recommendations.

4.2.1 | Alignment by signature strengths

Clients identify their top character strengths on the VIA Survey. These are viewed as central resources for the client to enhance well-being and overcome challenges. Most clients are blind to their strengths (Linley, 2008) and, at best, typically have not given much thought to why and how their character strengths might serve them in their recovery or happiness (Niemiec, 2018). Therefore, the therapist pairs a film with a strong signature strength portrayal that matches one of a client's signature strengths. The client and therapist can then discuss new ways the client could use their signature strengths (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Schutte & Malouff, 2019; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

4.2.2 | Alignment by other strengths

This approach emphasizes the therapist aligning a film recommendation with one of the client's nonsignature strengths. This might be a strength the client has struggled with, never previously considered to be a strength or one that they appear to desperately need more of. The client may need to tap into their bravery to make a difficult

phone call or to persevere with a serious health diagnosis. The film offers a partial template for positive action. The client learns about the strength through observation and empathic connection with the character, and potential behavioral change through cinematic elevation or cinematic admiration.

4.2.3 | Alignment by well-being goal

Here, the therapist attempts to align a film recommendation with the client's well-being goal. Movies can bring clients happiness at the moment and offer opportunities for them to think back and recall that happiness (Niemiec, 2011). Whether concretely articulated or not, clients are interested in experiencing greater well-being. Well-being has been framed as consisting of five independent though interrelated areas: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment (captured with the acronym PERMA; Seligman, 2011), with some researchers adding positive health as the sixth area of well-being. The 24 character strengths have been empirically shown to serve as pathways to these well-being areas (e.g., see Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2018). Examples of these and other important positive phenomena are provided in Table 3.

Therapists are encouraged to explore client areas of well-being, identifying their success areas as well as their areas of greatest desired need. This conversation can closely connect with the client's therapeutic goals.

4.2.4 | Alignment by client's disorder/presenting problem

Therapists can align the film recommendation with the client's psychological diagnosis or presenting problem area. The portrayal of psychopathology in film has been discussed and cataloged for several decades (e.g., Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). The most comprehensive cataloging of the DSM-5 diagnoses and cinematic discussions can be found in over 1000 examples in Wedding and Niemiec (2014). This alignment area offers the client concrete examples and insight into their struggles, including etiology, pathogenesis, symptomatology, and treatment recommendations. There's an opportunity for therapists to explore the role of the character's strengths and how they used those strengths to confront, cope with, understand, or overcome their problems or manage their mental illness. Table 4 offers examples with compelling character strengths uses to cope with psychological disorders or problems.

TABLE 3 Areas of well-being and film exemplars

Area of well-being	Film example (year)	Character strength pathways in the film
Positive emotions	<i>Inside Out</i> (2015)	Love, teamwork, judgment
Engagement	<i>House of Flying Daggers</i> (2004)	Self-regulation, creativity, perspective
Positive relationships	<i>The Station Agent</i> (2003)	Kindness, forgiveness, fairness
Meaning	<i>Stranger Than Fiction</i> (2006)	Curiosity, creativity, prudence
Accomplishment	<i>America's Heart and Soul</i> (2004)	Perspective, perseverance, leadership
Positive health	<i>Warm Springs</i> (2005)	Gratitude, social intelligence, zest
Resilience	<i>Okja</i> (2017)	Fairness, leadership, perseverance
Mindfulness	<i>A Quiet Place</i> (2018)	Self-regulation, curiosity, teamwork

TABLE 4 Psychological disorder (or problems) and character strengths use in films

Film	Character	Disorder/problem area	Character strengths used
<i>Canvas</i> (2006)	Mary Marino	Schizophrenia	Creativity, love
<i>Thumbsucker</i> (2005)	Justin Cobb	ADHD	Social intelligence, self-regulation
<i>Welcome to Marwen</i> (2018)	Mark Hogancamp	PTSD	Creativity, forgiveness, love, humor/playfulness
<i>A Star is Born</i> (2018)	Jack	Alcohol dependence	Creativity, curiosity, love
<i>Dealt</i> (2017)	Richard Turner	Physical disability/blindness	humor, perseverance, creativity
<i>On Body and Soul</i> (2017)	Mária	Intellectual/developmental disability (autism)	Judgment, love
<i>Elling</i> (2001)	Elling	Anxiety disorder	Bravery, perseverance, teamwork
<i>The Visitor</i> (2007)	Walter Vale	Depressive disorder	Zest, creativity
<i>Silver Linings Playbook</i> (2012)	-	Bipolar disorder	Hope, teamwork
<i>Away from Her</i> (2006)	-	Dementia	Love, perspective

Abbreviations: ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder.

5 | CHARACTER STRENGTHS-SPOTTING INTEGRATED IN CINEMATHERAPY

Character strengths-spotting involves the naming of an observed character strength along with a rationale, explanation, or behavioral evidence for the strength label. This practice is done intrapersonally (i.e., spotting character strengths in oneself), interpersonally (i.e., spotting character strengths in another person), and in the media, such as in the characters of a book, television show, social media outlet, media personality, or movie. It is designed to boost the person's strengths fluency and set the priming for future strengths use and virtuous expression.

Strengths-spotting is the foundation of character strengths cinematherapy and can be done across any genre of film (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). For example, Ansari and Scott (2020) discuss strengths-spotting as a tool to highlight the character strengths of superheroes and supervillains to facilitate cinematherapy. There are a number of ways to enhance the practical utility of spotting character strengths. I offer a few applications next.

5.1 | Use the Aware–Explore–Apply model

Work with your client's signature strengths by using the main strength-based model, Aware–Explore–Apply (Niemiec, 2014, 2018), which explains the general process of mindful strengths expression. The client breaks through strengths blindness by naming/labeling a strength (aware), queries, reflects, and digs into past, present, and future potential use of the strength (explore), then takes action and sets goals for future strengths behavior (apply). Cinematherapy efficiently and effectively supports this model. Therapists can guide the client with questions, depending on what stage in their strengths growth they are at.

Aware: What are the signature strengths of the different female protagonists in the acclaimed film, *Roma* (2018)? Out of all the top strengths you witnessed in these characters, which strength do you relate most to? Is this a core quality within you?

Explore: You share the signature strength of leadership with T. E. Lawrence's character in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)—what are the different ways Lawrence uses his leadership? How does he use this strength when things are

going well and not going well? How do you use this signature strength at times of stress, boredom, and exhilaration? How has this strength served you at work, home, and in the community?

Apply: When you observed the various high school students using their creativity and zest in the film, *Louder Than a Bomb* (2010), does that give you ideas on how you might use your signature strengths of creativity or zest? How might you use one of these strengths to help you reach your treatment goal? What action might you take this week with one of these strengths?

5.2 | Spotting strengths overuse and underuse

Whenever there is a character out of balance, struggling in some way, or negatively impacting others, viewers can look for the underuse or overuse of character strengths (Niemic, 2019). Distinguished from character strengths misuse (which is deliberate, malevolent use of strengths to harm others), overuse and underuse are universal phenomena that can help explain problems and reframe them in an empowering way. Clients can see the overuse/underuse on screen and relate to this behavior, thus opening up new opportunities for discussion and change.

Divergent (2014) is a film that perhaps more than any other directly targets the phenomena of overuse and underuse (Niemic, 2014). Set in a postapocalyptic society that is divided across five virtues, the characters in each virtue are expected to act one-dimensionally with that virtue/strength (e.g., with bravery, with kindness, with self-regulation). This limited self-expression lends itself to extensive displays of strengths overuse which appear widely in the film and offer clients a great opportunity to see and explore these phenomena in action.

A savvy viewer might want to take on the challenging film *Mother!* (2017), by auteur Darren Aronofsky. The imbalances of character strengths and virtues in the film are extensive and spread across every character that appears on the screen; thus, viewers can use the lens of overuse and underuse to enhance their understanding. The underuse of kindness and perspective is clear in Robert De Niro's character in *The Irishman* (2019) as he has many opportunities to redeem himself from a life of crime in the mob and to pursue care for humanity; however, he never pursues the use of these strengths. Over 100 film examples of overuse/underuse can be found in Niemic and Wedding (2014). Here are a few standout examples: *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), *Pawn Sacrifice* (2015), and *Whiplash* (2014).

Therapists might question their clients about the cinematic expression of strengths underuse or overuse, inviting them to consider what the portrayal tells them about their own strengths use and the potential for optimal use.

5.3 | Overcoming adversity

The medium of film is specially equipped for the portrayal of perseverance and resilience. When clients need an example of facing hardship and continuing to push forward, character strengths cinematography might be the answer.

Chris Gardner's character in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2005) is a classic story of a person going through substantial hardship of different kinds (e.g., unemployment, marital separation) and the use of character strengths to face and overcome each adversity. Another strong resilience model can be seen in the title character of *Erin Brockovich* (2000) who uses her signature strengths of bravery, honesty, and perseverance to steadfastly handle tremendous adversity.

A number of films in the last few years show substantial perseverance with the facing and managing of almost impossible obstacles in a range of circumstances, for example, *Bird Box* (2018), *Lion* (2016), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016), *Hidden Figures* (2016), *The 33* (2015), *The Revenant* (2015), *Room* (2015), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Selma* (2014).

Therapists might ask their client: How does the character's portrayal inspire you to use one of your character strengths to handle your current situation?

5.4 | Building relationships

Character strengths are the core ingredients in forming and maintaining good relationships (Niemic, 2018). To highlight this point, ask clients to imagine one of their close relationships without the expression of love or forgiveness or honesty or hope. Clients quickly begin to see their character strengths are there in simple, everyday uses as well as in substantial ways. The therapist can then turn to cinematherapy to encourage them to ignite their relationship strengths by watching films about connection and overcoming relationship conflicts or differences.

Stories of unlikely friendships offer an opportunity for new connections, the building of trust, and the evaporation of differences and stereotypes. Some strong examples of films portraying unlikely friendships include *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Visitor* (2007), *Win Win* (2011), *Trust* (1990), *Finding Forrester* (2000), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *The Green Mile* (1999), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003), *Toy Story* (1995), and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2011). In *Green Book* (2018), a bond between a driver and a genius pianist is formed as they share personal struggles and handle racial injustices. Romantic relationships are explored from characters young to old in numerous films such as *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014), *Once* (2006), *Everything, Everything* (2017), and *45 Years* (2015).

Therapists using character strengths cinematherapy to help clients deepen intimacy and connection with others are encouraged to ask their clients: What character strengths do each of the characters bring to the relationship? How do these strengths come together synergistically and how do they collide and cause problems in the relationship? Clients should be reminded that no film will display a flawless relationship but that many can offer insights into healthy behaviors and portrayals of effort to grow, connect, and love.

6 | CONCLUSION

Character strengths cinematherapy offers clients an opportunity to look within, using a medium that is, at its best, enjoyable, engaging, and empowering. As clients observe role models and heroes on screen, they learn about ways to use (and not use) their character strengths and virtues. This provides an opportunity for immediate reflection on their own best qualities and discovering growth opportunities that bring benefit to themselves and to others. Therapists using this medium can take advantage of the numerous ways by which they might align movies with their client's strengths, goals, and struggles. Strengths-spotting practices in the cinema can be a focal point in therapeutic discussions and serve as springboards for positive interventions.

While the science of character strengths cinematherapy is nascent, the practical applications for therapists to explore and apply this study—to then inform the science—is undeniable. There is indeed potential for utilizing the principles in this approach in large scale projects to impact social change. At the same time, therapists can begin using this approach with the client in front of them to promote change one person at a time.

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