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HEALTH

Health news
 Health features
 Health briefings
 Health alternatives
 Health diet
 Health fitness
 Health industry

TIMES ONLINE

Home
 Breaking news
 Britain
 World
 Sport
 Business
 Your Money
 Comment
 Sports Book
 Travel
 Entertainment
 Shopping
 Law
 Classifieds
 Games
 Crossword
 Motoring
 Property
 Health
 Student
 Weather
 Sunday Times

NEWSPAPER

Monday
 Tuesday
 Wednesday
 Thursday
 Friday
 Saturday
 Sunday

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Appointments
 Arts
 Books
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 Creme
 Education
 Encounters
 Fast Times
 Finest
 First night
 Food and drink
 From the Archive
 Good University Guide
 Online Specials
 Photosales
 Promotions
 Public Agenda
 Style Guide
 Supplements
 Talking Point
 The Register
 Times e-mail
 Times 2
 Times Services
 Weekend Review

SPECIAL REPORTS

Investor's Centre
 Business Insurance
 Unplugged Office
 Highly Developed
 CRM Public Sector
 CRM for Business
 Business Travel

Health features

February 21, 2004

Movie therapy: Dramatic cures?

by Nick Wyke

Can't afford an analyst? Then head to the cinema for movie therapy

When the Oscar winners are announced tomorrow night I shall have my acceptance speech ready. Not that I'm shortlisted, of course, or have even made a film, except inside my head. But I have undergone movie therapy in which I remade my life into an imaginary "classic" and, as a climax to this feel-good process, wrote an awards ceremony thank-you list for all the people who have made a difference to my life.

Most of us would prefer to sit on the couch to watch a movie than undergo therapy. For one thing, it's about a tenth of the price. But now, with the arrival of movie therapy, it seems the two needn't be mutually exclusive. The idea that films can be useful tools in therapy hardly raises a cry of eureka among therapists — Aristotle identified the emotionally expunging effect of Greek drama more than 2,000 years ago. And we are more likely to talk about what we see than what we read.

"It's a perfectly valid tool," says Phillip Hodson, a psychotherapist. "Movies deal with archetypal situations and make us feel emotions. Some people find it impossible to cry in real life, but everyone has wept at least once at the cinema." For good or for bad, tearful life experiences change us, and transforming pain and suffering into hope is the basic plot outline of many movies.

"If you can identify with characters trapped in their circumstances, and share their disappointments as well as their unsteady steps towards liberation, you may find optimism in your own situation," says Birgit Wolz, a cinema therapist based in America.

From a technological perspective, the French film director Jean-Luc Godard wrote: "If photography is truth, then cinema is truth 24 times per second." And it is identifying those split-second on-screen verities and allowing that awareness to cast light in the dark recesses of your own life that forms the premise of movie therapy.

Bernie Wooder, a psycho-spiritual psychotherapist and pioneer of film therapy in the UK, helps his clients to uncover home truths through cinema. A self-confessed Barry Norman by the age of 10, he became aware of the power of film to heal and raise people's consciousness when he discovered that films were the only way for some of his clients to express deep hurt.

"Because cinemagoers watch films from a third person perspective, their defences are often down and the film acts as a springboard to self-discovery," Wooder says. He likens it to the Buddhist idea of transferring the ego beyond oneself in order to see who you really are.

An early breakthrough came when a brief scene from *Saving Private Ryan*, in which an American soldier picks up his own arm after having it blown off, helped a client find the underlying cause to his severe road rage. "The look of shock on the young soldier's face connected the client to his own unresolved shock and grief over his father's suicide. Instead of feeling that shock, he had carried on as normal like the soldier.

This scene connected him to a place and depth of emotion in himself he could never previously reach," Wooder says.

For another client, *Far from Heaven*, Todd Haynes's award-winning film about socially taboo relationships in Fifties America, helped her to recognise the full extent of the prejudice she had faced when her engagement to a Turkish man fell through. "The film was painful for her but deepened her self-understanding and guided her towards new boundaries and clarity in relationships," Wooder says. "By openly acknowledging your negative feelings you start to get stronger. Then with acceptance comes a kind of peace — that's your power."

Wooder has a vision to see movie therapy used in hospitals and prisons, ideal places to encourage healing and growth. In America, prisoners have renounced suicide after seeing *It's a Wonderful Life*. "The old black and white films are often the best for calming people down," Wooder says, "because they conjure up nostalgia and innocence. Comedies are also effective because laughing releases endorphins and this puts us in a good mood and helps us relax."

Becalmig is how you might describe the movie therapist Brian Mills's houseboat moored off an island on the Thames near Hampton Court. If the

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setting is like a movie location then his boat is like a mini-cinema. There's a 42in plasma screen and movie posters and shelves of videos adorn the walls. Mills is a movie buff, complete with MGM sweatshirt, and a graduate of Angel therapy, a psychic-spiritual treatment pioneered in America. Numerous angelic figurines watch over his home.

Mills brands his therapy: "Cinema Couch — the new kid to unblock". "The aim is to find a paralysing paradigm through watching and discussing films that compel the client, unlock the problem and then look at the layers behind it," he says. The basis of the therapy is an 22-part questionnaire. It takes you from an analysis of the characters that you identify with in your favourite films to rewriting the film of your own life, reviewing it and owning up to a vast list of character traits that worryingly include — though not in my case — "killer" and "thief".

While I'm sitting on the cinema couch, *The Apartment*, *Ben-Hur*, *Roman Holiday* and *The Great Dictator* spring to mind. Together we reach some feasible truths quickly. The verdict — which could have been worse — is that I'm far too accommodating and have a fear of getting things wrong. But like Jack Lemmon (*The Apartment*), I'll come through, though at a price.

The next task is to rewrite my life and "shoot" a classic starring the new me: marginally meaner and fearless. Before long I had a rough plot with John Cusack in the lead role as a journo exposing corruption in the Vatican and winning back the girlfriend who had left at the beginning of the "film". The soundtrack is Fauré's *Requiem* with the odd burst of Sam Cooke and Van Morrison for the romance scenes. Was this fantasy or therapy? I wasn't sure, but it felt quite good. And the four-star review I wrote for *Chasing the Truth*, a working title for my film, suggested Oscar potential.

Part of the therapy also suggests watching a film that you loathe without the sound and re-writing it. Then asking yourself why you made the changes. "This process helps to put you in control," Mills says. I had to draw a line here — I couldn't face watching *In America*, with Samantha Morton, again with or without sound.

So who is likely to benefit from movie therapy? Lee Thomas, a 47-year-old administrator, almost ran away to Greece after watching *Shirley Valentine* on the Cinema Couch. "It twanged a nerve, but helped me to face family issues of respect, freedom and routine. It's an enjoyable way to learn about yourself," he says. Mills says: "It's good for identifying a recurring problem, to objectify and become aware of it — and perhaps put a stop to it next time it occurs."

Otherwise, in the best tradition of Hollywood it was fun, but a tad superficial. Still, I'd like to thank my movie therapist ...

CRY FREEDOM

<|> To find a movie that matches your feelings visit www.cinematherapy.com

- Sit comfortably and follow your breathing until you are calm. Start the film and observe how it affects your breathing.
- Feel compassion with the characters' pain if you can; cry if you want to. This will help you to be compassionate with your own pain in a helpful way. After the film write down your feelings, focusing on the loss or disappointment you experienced in real life.
- By opening to your pain, you learn to grieve and live at the same time.
- Contact Bernie Wooder, 020-8386 4846, www.themovitherapist.com; and Brian Mills at Cinema Couch, 020-8979 9999, angelsontags@yahoo.co.uk

MOVIE THERAPY

Having a mid-life crisis? *Lost in Translation*: two lonesome strangers stranded in Tokyo connect to each other's deepest needs. The story may give insight into what is missing in your life and how to attain it. An encouraging tale for those in a mid-life crisis.

Guilt got you on edge? *The Last Samurai*: a US army captain is drawn to his captors' convictions as he reflects on his grim past and seeks to redeem himself. The message is that guilt will torture the mind, unless it is faced to allow redemption.

No way you can forgive? *Mystic River*: a cautionary tale of childhood buddies who grow up with dark secrets. Keeping secrets can be dangerous to your mental health and to the welfare of those around you. It's always best to come clean. After seeing this film you should be able to forgive just about anyone who has wronged you.

Learn to delegate, mate! *Master and Commander*: this swashbuckler highlights issues of communication and team work. It teaches you to recognise your limits and accept that another may have the skills you lack. Don't let your ego block that realisation.

Know your limits? *Cold Mountain*: intense things-we-do-for-love epic set during the American

Civil War that will inspire people to focus on their goals and realise that the humble homo sapiens can survive a hell of a lot, but has his limits.

A phobia about short men with hairy feet? *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the Ring*: the third part of the trilogy of Tolkien's tale of the battle for Middle-earth is about overcoming our fears. Like many good mythical tales it is a gentle prompt that we need to treasure our helpers on life's journey.



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