

The therapeutic potential of using film as an intervention in counselling and psychotherapy

A narrative inquiry

Jillian Majella Lynch

Diploma of Adult Psychotherapy,
Australia and New Zealand Association of Psychotherapy, Australia

Bachelor of Counselling, University of New England, Australia

Bachelor of Arts in Communication, University of Technology
Sydney, Australia

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the University of New England**

February 2011

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

I would like to acknowledge my principal supervisor Dr Frances MacKay and co-supervisor Dr Ann Moir-Bussy who have generously provided time, constant support and critical feedback. I greatly appreciate their encouragement, ongoing commitment and their tireless reading of my work.

My sons Cy and Zachary have shown interest in my projects for many years, and their loving acknowledgement of my ability to achieve my goals has been a source of strength for me. During the time I have been working on this research, I became a grandmother to Vincent and Tabitha. They are a constant joy and I am grateful to their mother Lisa for nurturing their relationship with Grandma.

I have also greatly appreciated the love and support of my sisters Anne and Louise, and my brothers Michael and Maurice, and their respective partners.

Most especially, I want to acknowledge the devoted support of my husband Donald. His consistent encouragement, good humour and loving patience have sustained me throughout the entire period of this project. I am particularly indebted to his remarkable ability to spot a split infinitive from a mile away.

I would like to thank Carolyn who encouraged me to undertake my first degree many years ago, and who has continued to be a source of inspiration and loyal friend. The supportive friendship of my colleague and friend, Ludmila, with whom I share a therapy space, has been warmly appreciated. The constant love and support of my friends Trish, Anna, and Jenny, and their forgiveness of my tardy correspondences and forgotten birthdays, have been nurturing and sustaining.

Finally I would like to thank all the participants, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I am very grateful for the generosity they showed in sharing their stories.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my parents Maurice and Sheila Lynch. I know they would both have been very pleased.

A b s t r a c t

Despite increasing interest in the use of film as a therapeutic method in counselling and psychotherapy, there is a paucity of research into the lived experience of therapists who use film in their work, and no available research into the ways in which clients create meaning from the experience of this therapeutic intervention known as cinematherapy. The purpose of this study was to investigate the therapeutic potential of using film as an intervention in clinical practice, and to gain understanding of how clients in therapy might experience this.

In-depth interviews, informed by a phenomenological, interpretive approach, were used to explore the experience of eight practitioners who used film therapeutically, and eight film viewers whose lives had been influenced by film, two of whom had experienced the use of film as clients. A narrative inquiry approach, drawing on constructivism and social constructionism, was employed to present and analyse the data. The practitioners' narratives identified the formative influence of film in their professional lives, and how and why film continued to provide them with an important frame of reference. The film viewers' narratives described the complex emotional experiences involved in the activity of viewing a film, and the overall impact that film had on their lives. Those who had experienced film in therapy as clients told stories of transformation experienced through these encounters. The narratives, many of which reflected a range of therapeutic approaches including the influence of Winnicott's (1971) concept of the use of cultural phenomena, were examined in the light of the literature relating to the clinical use of film, and the diverse range of literature related to the film-viewing experience.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the therapeutic use of film at the levels of both practice and theory. By suggesting how and why film may be used appropriately and effectively as a therapeutic intervention in a range of contexts, this study provides an appreciation of what is possible when film is brought into the therapeutic space.

Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



.....

Jillian Lynch

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Certification.....	iv
Table of Contents	v

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background	1
Aims of the research	2
Definitions of terms	3
Putting myself in the frame	4
Going to the pictures	5
The politics of the cinematic space	6
Cinematherapy: a self-help approach	8
The use of films in the training of counsellors and psychotherapists	10
Cinematic portrayals of mental illness, therapy and therapists	11
The relationship between film and therapy	13
From film spectatorship to the film-viewing subject.....	14
The significance of my study	17
A summary and overview of the thesis.....	17

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction	19
The cinematherapy literature	20
Cinematherapy: an evolving story	21
Film and family therapy.....	25
The use of film in hospitals and other institutional settings	26
Empirical studies of group cinematherapy with children and young people....	31
The use of film in brief group therapy with adult clients	34
Film and positive psychology.....	35
Cinematherapy and bibliotherapy	37
Film as a source of therapeutic metaphor.....	40
Therapist-generated metaphors	42
Prescriptive versus serendipitous viewing of film by a client	43

Other theoretical issues relating to the therapeutic use of film	44
The use of film from various theoretical orientations	46
Guidelines for the use of film in counselling and psychotherapy	48
The client as viewer	50
Cautions about the use of cinematherapy	51
Gaps in the literature	52
The psychological processes in the experience of film and other media	53
Identification as a psychological process	53
Identification in the psychology of film viewing	55
Parasocial interaction	57
Parasocial interaction and attachment theory	57
Measuring identification	58
Transitional space, transitional phenomena	59
Mood management	61
Escapism, entertainment and play	63
Repeat viewing and film quotations	63
Creating possible selves	64
Conclusion	64

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction	66
Finding a research approach	66
Phenomenology and hermeneutics	67
Constructivism and social constructionism	70
Narrative considerations	71
The challenges of narrative inquiry	73
Bricolage, collage or montage	74
Current concepts of self	75
Emerging research questions	78
Methods	77
Moving through the sampling process and developing the project	78
Participants recruited from various locations	81
Sampling strategies.....	81
Friends as participants	82
Data collection	83
In-depth interviewing	84

The focus group	87
Technology: Skype phone interviews	87
Email as an interview medium	88
Transcriptions	88
Process of analysis	91
Documentation style and film referencing	93
Ethics	94
Criteria for evaluating inquiry	94
Conclusion	95

Chapter 4

SETTING THE SCENE

Introduction.....	96
Viewers: Focus group	97
The focus group story	97
Viewers: Individuals	103
Joshua	103
James	106
Viewer: Professional background in mental health	110
Sarah	110
Viewers: Professional background in mental health, and experience of film in personal therapy	113
Gwyneth	113
Cordelia	116
Practitioners: Face-to-face interviews	118
Patrick	118
Virginia	120
Practitioners: Skype phone interviews	122
Birgit	122
Donna	124
Michael	125
Emily	127
Charles	129
Practitioner: Skype and email interview	132
Lars	132
Conclusion	134

Chapter 5

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: The film viewer narratives

Introduction	135
Evolving relationship with film	135
Formative influence of film	137
Film as a way of promoting social connection	138
Film: an educational tool	140
Film: entertainment, escape or reflective space?	141
The cinematic space	143
Film: just entertainment?	144
The reflective space	145
Who brings the film into the therapeutic space?	147
The symbolic and metaphoric possibilities of film	149
Identification with film	151
Film as emotional release	153
Through a different lens	155
The need for new stories	159
Conclusion	159

Chapter 6

CINEMATHERAPY IN PRACTICE: The practitioners' narratives

Introduction	161
Practice narratives	162
A safe emotional distance	165
A catalyst for discussion	166
Just an intervention	165
Contraindications and cautionary tales	168
Therapeutic relationship	169
Processing the film experience	171
Assessment criteria	171
A pedagogical tool	172
Film as a source of metaphor	172
Entertainment or therapy?	175
Theory narratives	176
The influence of prior experience	176
Creative interventions	178
Theoretical perspectives	181

Eclectic-integrative approaches	184
Play and potential space	186
Conclusion	187

Chapter 7

DISCUSSION

Introduction	189
The formative influence of film	190
A communication tool	191
Maintaining emotional distance with film	193
Externalising, normalising or displacing the problem	194
Vicarious experience of film	195
Forms of engagement with film	197
The film spectator's position	199
Escapism, entertainment or therapy	200
Transitional phenomena and transitional space	203
Variations in the application of film	206
Metaphor in the movies	208
The impact of theoretical perspectives	209
Eclecticism	210
Cinematherapy and bibliotherapy	211
The film-viewing process	213
Identification	215
Contextualising the stories	216
Transforming the self-narrative	217
Therapist supplied stories	219
The therapeutic relationship	221
When cinematherapy is contraindicated	223
The credibility of cinematherapy	224
Other considerations in the therapeutic use of film	225
Conclusion	226

Chapter 8

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction	227
Implications for a contribution to knowledge	227
Implications and recommendations for practice	231

My research journey: from maze to montage	234
Reflections on the research methodology.....	235
Implications for future research	236
Conclusion	237
References	239
Appendices	264
Appendix A: Information sheet for individual participants	
Appendix B: Information sheet for focus group participants	
Appendix C: Information sheet for counselling and psychotherapy practitioners	
Appendix D: Consent form	
Appendix E: Interview question guide for individuals & focus group	
Appendix F: Interview question guide for counsellors and psychotherapists	