

Chapter 1

Introduction

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

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.
Thomas Merton

The second quotation by the humble but influential Trappist monk Thomas Merton addresses the reason that many people enjoy films, and why cinema is one of the most influential and popular forms of art. It is also a description of the paradoxical benefits of the major topic of this book, the positive psychology movie.

The Language of Film Is Universal

This popular expression reminds film viewers of the inherent power of the cinema. Movies transcend all barriers and differences, whether these barriers are culture, language, religion, geographic borders, or belief systems. Language is a way of communicating thoughts and feelings, and it is a system that has particular rules, signs, and symbols that shape it and make it meaningful. Similar rules are found in movies; however, cinema is not localized to one country or group of people. Therefore, movies are a commentary on more than society—they inform us about the human condition.

A film's plot provides infrastructure and supports the film's subtext. Subtext refers to the complex structure that builds upon the various associations the narrative evokes in the viewer; the plot provides surface meaning while the subtext provides deeper meaning (Dick, 2002). Positive psychology theories, virtues, and strengths lie in the film's subtext. They emerge as powerful themes and motifs, and as qualities within the characters but beneath the storyline. For example, a story about a man and his son at a concentration camp has a complex subtext that includes incredible creativity, sacrifice, resiliency, and love (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of *Life Is Beautiful*, 1997). The psychological landscape the characters inhabit (i.e., their instincts, motivations, beliefs, emotions, and behavior) is part of the subtext.

Other subtext components include the culture and customs of setting and location, as well as the social and political dynamics of the communities and organizations portrayed in a film. Another level of subtext is created through the use of metaphor, e.g. the roses used throughout *American Beauty* (1999). The cinematic craft—cinematography, lighting, sound, set design, special effects—plays an important role in accentuating a film's themes. Consider the visual effects used in *Forrest Gump* (1994) that follow a feather (symbolizing hope) floating up at the conclusion of the film.

The viewer plays the most important role, co-participating in the act of creating meaning when viewing a film. The viewer's understanding of the film, his or her projections onto the film and its characters, the inferences and assumptions the viewer makes, and his or her openness to the film all influence how the viewer will be affected by the film. If a viewer understands something about the subtext of a film before watching it (e.g., the strengths and virtues portrayed), it will influence how that viewer focuses his or her attention and subsequently how much benefit he or she will receive from viewing the film.

The Positive Psychology Movement

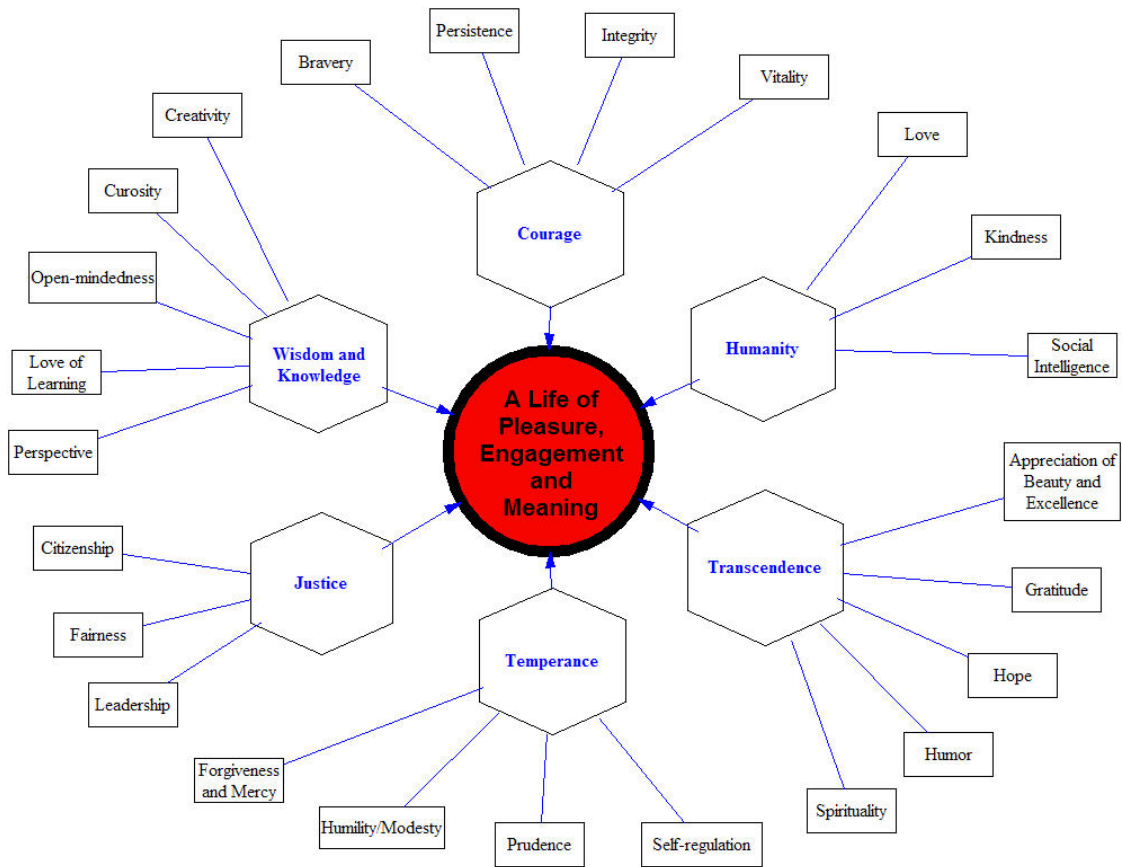
There is a history of research and speculation about optimal functioning and the factors that contribute to flourishing (Gable & Haidt, 2005) that dates back to the work of William James (1902) on healthy mindedness and Gordon Allport (1958) and his work with positive human characteristics, and which extends on to the humanistic movement in psychology. The work of humanistic and existential psychologists, such as Abraham Maslow (1971) and his examination of self-actualization, Carl Rogers (1961) and his work with unconditional positive regard, and the work of Irvin Yalom (1980) and Rollo May (1953) on meaning, has contributed enormously to help people improve their well-being and find purpose and meaning in their lives.

Psychologist Martin Seligman (1998; 1999) pioneered the field of positive psychology, initially bringing this movement into public awareness through an influential presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998. Seligman frequently describes the positive psychology movement as the study of what constitutes the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002). Put simply, positive psychology is the scientific study of human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001). In the millennial issue of the *American Psychologist*, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describe the importance of understanding and enhancing subjective experiences, i.e. contentment and satisfaction with the past, happiness in the present, and hope and optimism for the future.

This movement is necessary because the field of psychology has predominately focused on identifying, categorizing, and alleviating pathology – i.e., assessing, diagnosing, and treating psychological illness. The positive psychology movement emphasizes what is going right with people, maximizes their strengths, and fosters future growth. From a clinical standpoint, it is not only about fixing what is broken but also about nurturing what is best (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In their groundbreaking manual *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson and Seligman (2004) compiled a comprehensive system of virtues and strengths, and they delineated six human virtues that can be found (nearly) universally in over 200 virtue catalogues spanning more than 3000 years and countries across the globe, ranging from the major world religions to the philosophy of Aristotle to the writings of Benjamin Franklin to the samurai code. These six virtues are subdivided into 24 core human strengths. Each strength had to meet most of ten explicit criteria that constitute good character. This text has been referred to, tongue-in-cheek, as “The Manual of the Sanities” due not only to its systematized typology, scope, and data-driven analysis, but also to its focus on the positive features of human experience rather than pathologies. This manual helps advance other goals of the positive psychology movement: e.g., to investigate what constitutes the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life, and to explore the ingredients and factors of happiness. Figure 1 shows each of the 24 strengths, their corresponding virtues, and the nucleus of this configuration—a life of pleasure, engagement, and meaning.

Figure 1: Character strengths and virtues according to Peterson and Seligman (2004).



Seligman (2002) further describes the positive psychology mission:

It is not the job of Positive Psychology to tell you that you should be optimistic, or spiritual, or kind or good-humored; it is rather to describe the consequences of these traits . . . What you do with that information depends on your own values and goals." (p. 129)

There are three conceptual levels in the study of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), categorized from general to specific: virtues, strengths, and situational themes. *Virtues* are those universal, core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. *Strengths* are the psychological ingredients or specific routes through which virtues are displayed. *Situational themes* are specific habits that lead people to display strengths in particular situations. Because Peterson and Seligman focus on the intermediate level of classification—

character strengths—we will as well, but we will focus on the ways in which these strengths are portrayed in films.

In less than a decade, positive psychology has flourished and has influenced research and clinical work around the world. The movement has facilitated the work of numerous researchers, scholars, and clinicians by providing a different way to look at people and their behavior. Handbooks of positive psychology that address assessment, theory, research, and practice now abound (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2004; Peterson, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Specific strengths-based work is emerging in organizations (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), in psychotherapy (Seligman et al., 2006), in workbooks (Bolt, 2004), and in theoretical models referred to as strength-centered therapy (Wong, 2006). In particular, books and articles addressing the historical and scientific study of happiness have proliferated (see Ben-Shahar, 2007; Gilbert, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Hecht, 2007; Layard, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2001; McMahon, 2006).

Organizations and scholarly meetings that promote the continued growth of positive psychology include the International Positive Psychology Summit, The European Network of Positive Psychology, several university-based Positive Psychology Centers, and the Positive Psychology Network. The Positive Psychology Network funds over 50 research groups involving more than 150 scientists from universities world-wide (Seligman et al., 2005).

A documentary video from Norway, *How Happy Can You Be* (2005), examines positive psychology and the field of happiness studies, and it integrates questions from a skeptical documentary filmmaker. It includes tips to increase happiness levels and the perspective of several positive psychology researchers from around the world, including Sonya Lyubomirsky, Ed Diener, Robert Biswas-Diener, sociologist John Cacioppo, and Ruut Veenhoven, the director of the World Happiness Database in Rotterdam, who has gathered over 8,000 research studies with happiness data from 120 countries.

In addition to several schools in the United States that have courses in Positive Psychology (including Harvard's most popular class in 2006), the University of Pennsylvania has a popular graduate program in which students can earn Masters of Arts degrees in Applied Positive Psychology. There also are two scientific, peer-reviewed journals that specifically address positive psychology constructs—*The Journal of Happiness Studies* (published in the Netherlands) and *The Journal of Positive Psychology*—and many other publications that address particular strengths (e.g., the *Creativity Research Journal*).

This movement is not trying to contribute to an artificial dichotomy that pits the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* against *Character Strengths and Virtues*; instead, it seeks to integrate the fullness of the human experience, which includes both good and bad aspects. Positive psychologists understand and appreciate the limitations associated with seeing the field of positive psychology as “happiology” or a paradigm shift in the science of psychology (Peterson, 2006). Positive psychology grows out of robust research on subjective well-being and character strengths, and it links with humanistic psychology and other avenues of inquiry that emphasize wellness.

It is a mistake to think that positive psychology is simply positive thinking, pop psychology, or feel-good spirituality. “Ultimately, the way of the positive psychologist must be to reflect on the nature of living systems – systems in which positive emotions act with negative emotions, character strengths act with character weaknesses, and human virtues act with human vices – intrapersonally, interpersonally, and extrapersonally” (Hogan, 2005).

Flourishing and the Positivity Ratio

Flourishing means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, building strengths, goodness, and resiliency (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). This contrasts with “languishing,” as well as with psychopathology. It is estimated that less than 20% of adults flourish. One predictor of flourishing is the *positivity ratio*, the ratio of pleasant feelings and sentiments to unpleasant ones over time. Fredrickson & Losada (2005) report that the mean ratio was 2.9 for individuals identified as flourishing. [This approach to measurement of positive human functioning is reminiscent of Gottman’s approach to predicting which marriages would be successful. Gottman (1994) reported that those marriages in which the ratio of positive to negative communication was less than 5 to 1 were likely to fail.] Fredrickson and Losada summarize their findings as follows:

Human flourishing is optimal functioning characterized by four key components: (a) *goodness*, indexed by happiness, satisfaction, and superior functioning; (b) *generativity*, indexed by broadened thought-action repertoires and behavioral flexibility; (c) *growth*, indexed by gains in enduring personal and social resources; and (d) *resilience*, indexed by survival and growth in the aftermath of adversity. Each of these four components will be linked to positivity ratios at or above 2.9. (p. 685)

Integration of Positive Psychology and Film: A Harmonious Relationship

The renowned filmmaker Stanley Kubrick once remarked, “If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed.” The medium of film, more than any other art form, is able to portray the subtleties of the human mind—thoughts, emotions, instincts, and motives—and their impact on behavior. This makes positive psychology movies a natural vehicle for examining character strengths and how they are developed and maintained.

Strengths are often connected with an individual’s sense of self as well as with his or her behavior. The former poses a challenge to the predominately visual modality of the cinema, an art form that is better suited for portraying action and characters’ behavior rather than the subtleties of character. This is remedied in part by the talent and creativity of filmmakers who are able to explore the mind, identity, and internal world of characters through image, sound, and the evocative power of films.

Character strengths abound in the cinema. The most common positive psychology strengths portrayed in films are creativity, bravery, persistence, hope, love, kindness, and spirituality. It is relatively easy to find characters in films that embody these strengths, because each lends itself nicely to a visual modality like film. The strengths of humility, love of learning, and prudence are less often depicted in films. See Table 1.1 for a list of some of the best positive psychology films that depict critical character development and change according to each of the 24 strengths categorized by Peterson and Seligman.

Table 1.1: Positive psychology movies with the corresponding strengths and virtues they depict.

Film	Character	Virtue	Strength Exhibited
<i>My Left Foot</i> (1989)	Christy Brown	Wisdom	Creativity
<i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	L. B. Jefferies	Wisdom	Curiosity
<i>Fargo</i> (1996)	Marge Gunderson	Wisdom	Open-mindedness
<i>Akeelah and the Bee</i> (2006)	Akeelah	Wisdom	Love of Learning
<i>Antonia's Line</i> (1995)	Antonia	Wisdom	Perspective
<i>Batman Begins</i> (2005)	Bruce Wayne	Courage	Bravery
<i>The Pride of the Yankees</i> (1942)	Lou Gehrig	Courage	Persistence
<i>Erin Brockovich</i> (2000)	Erin Brockovich	Courage	Integrity
<i>The World's Fastest Indian</i> (2005)	Burt Munro	Courage	Vitality
<i>Somewhere in Time</i> (1980)	Richard Collier	Humanity	Love
<i>Chocolat</i> (2000)	Vianne Rocher	Humanity	Kindness
<i>Breach</i> (2007)	Eric O'Neill	Humanity	Social Intelligence
<i>Joyeux Noel</i> (2005)	Scottish, French, &	Justice	Citizenship
<i>12 Angry Men</i> (1957)	Juror #8	Justice	Fairness
<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i> (1962)	T. E. Lawrence	Justice	Leadership
<i>In My Country</i> (2005)	People of South Africa	Temperance	Forgiveness/Mercy
<i>Hero</i> (2002)	Nameless	Temperance	Humility/Modesty
<i>The Queen</i> (2006)	Queen Elizabeth II	Temperance	Prudence
<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994)	Forrest Gump	Temperance	Self-Regulation
<i>Wings of Desire</i> (1987)	Damiel	Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
<i>Groundhog Day</i> (1993)	Phil Connors	Transcendence	Gratitude
<i>Eternity and a Day</i> (1998)	Alexander	Transcendence	Hope
<i>Zorba the Greek</i> (1964)	Alexis Zorba	Transcendence	Humor
<i>Field of Dreams</i> (1989)	Ray Kinsella	Transcendence	Spirituality

Several films portray a character displaying more than one positive psychology strength (see Table 1.2). In such films, it is interesting to consider what the character's dominant strength is, the strength that accentuates or maintains other strengths in the character. The dominant strength is often the one that is most imperative to the growth of the character. Such

films provide a valuable opportunity for teachers and clinicians to discuss positive psychology and ways to build upon strengths.

Table 1.2. Film characters with multiple strengths.

Film	Character	Strength Exhibited	Dominant Strength
<i>The Pursuit of Happiness</i> (2006)	Chris Gardner	Love of learning, Hope, Love, Persistence, Perspective, Vitality	Persistence
<i>Amelie</i> (2001)	Amelie Poulain	Creativity, Curiosity Perspective, Kindness, Fairness, Gratitude Appreciation of beauty, Spirituality	Kindness
<i>The Wizard of Oz</i> (1939)	Dorothy	Forgiveness, hope prudence, spirituality	Spirituality/meaning
<i>The Matrix</i> (trilogy) (1999)	Neo	Open-mindedness, self-regulation, love, hope, spirituality	Open-mindedness
<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> (2005)	Charlie Bucket	Curiosity, integrity, Kindness, Love, Hope, Gratitude	Integrity
<i>The Chorus</i> (2004)	Clément Mathieu	Creativity, persistence, integrity, kindness	Creativity
<i>The Prize Winner of Defiance Ohio</i> (2005)	Evelyn Ryan	Perspective, prudence, persistence, vitality hope/optimism	Hope/optimism
<i>The New World</i> (2005)	Pocahontas	Integrity, love, kindness, gratitude, spirituality	Gratitude

In addition to multiple strengths appearing in films, multiple virtues appear as well. Particularly striking is *The Wizard of Oz* in which several characters each pursue a particular virtue. The scarecrow pursues wisdom, the lion pursues courage, the tin man pursues humanity, the wizard of Oz pursues justice, and Dorothy pursues temperance and transcendence.

Criteria for a Positive Psychology Film

It is important to recognize that any description of a work of art limits it: to categorize is to confine. Yet, providing criteria to structure one's interpretation and discussion of movies may be heuristic and have some pedagogical value. Niemiec (2007) presented four criteria for the positive psychology film, with particular emphasis on human strengths and virtues. He argues that positive psychology films have the following features:

- 1) Balanced portrayal of a character displaying at least one of the 24 strengths categorized by Peterson & Seligman (2004);
- 2) Depiction of obstacles and/or the struggle or conflict the character faces in reaching or maximizing the strength;
- 3) A character portrayal that illustrates how to overcome obstacles and/or build and maintain the strength; and
- 4) A tone or mood in the film that is inspiring and uplifting.

Some films that do not meet all these criteria still may be "positive psychology films"; however, we believe that those films that meet all four criteria are the most important and the best examples of positive psychology films.

There are three applicable levels to which one or more of these criteria may apply: the film character, the film itself, and the viewer. The first, the film character, is the level at which most of the discussion in this book will take place. For example, Julianne Moore's portrayal of Evelyn Ryan in *The Prize Winner of Defiance Ohio* (2005) offers a powerful model for hope and optimism; the four criteria described above are all readily met.

Sometimes the strength or virtue is apparent at the second level, in the film as a whole. For example, *The Sea Inside* (2004) is clearly "a justice film" that raises important issues of citizenship, fairness, human choice, and social justice. *The Sea Inside* meets all four criteria. While not part of Niemiec's criteria, this film takes a stand on a controversial issue, an individual's right to choose when and how to die.

The third level is the all-important viewer level. Most of the 24 strengths can potentially be elicited in the viewer as a direct result of the film.

The predominant strength of an individual is referred to in the positive psychology literature as their "signature strength." We apply this concept to the first criterion and in our discussion of strengths in movie characters throughout the book. Many positive psychologists suggest that individuals can recognize and identify their top five (of the 24) signature strengths.

Positive psychology movies are also about heroes, both the dramatic ones and those of everyday life. The American Film Institute (AFI) (2003) has identified the top 50 heroes in American film history. Consistent with our discussion of positive psychology movies, the AFI defined a hero as follows:

A character(s) who prevails in extreme circumstances and dramatizes a sense of morality, courage and purpose. Though they may be ambiguous or flawed, they often sacrifice themselves to show humanity at its best.

Elevation and the Movie-going Experience

Walt Disney once said, "So, in planning a new picture, we don't think of grown-ups and we don't think of children, but just of that fine, clean, unspoiled spot down deep in every one of us, that the world has maybe made us forget and maybe our pictures can help recall." Movies,

especially positive psychology movies, speak to that unspoiled spot that is present in all of us, where people escape from their lives into themselves and come out feeling better, stronger, and more willing to take healthy action.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) has conducted important studies of flourishing, happiness, and the experience of human emotion. He coins the term *elevation* to describe an emotion that is important to understanding positive psychology portrayals in films. Haidt defines three components of elevation:

- 1) Witnessing acts of moral beauty (e.g. humanity, courage, justice).
- 2) The physical sensation of warmth, glowing, or openness in the chest; and/or tingling in the skin, particularly along the back, neck, and head.
- 3) A motivation to move toward higher moral ends, e.g. helping others, or becoming better oneself.

These three components when applied to the everyday movie-going experience define what we call “cinematic elevation.” During cinematic elevation, viewers observe a character who is using his or her strengths and virtues, and depending on the viewers’ projections and values, feel those sensations of inspiration and subsequently decide to take action for their own greater good or the betterment of others or society.

Consider theories of mindfulness, savoring, and flow. There is something delightful about observing a character who is fully present as rain pours down on her body (see *My Life Without Me*, 2003), slowly deriving deep pleasure from chocolate (see *Chocolat*, 2000), or finding “the zone” while golfing (see *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, 2000). In the same way, the viewer becomes elevated by watching accounts of people doing good works for others, be it a fictional depiction (see *Amelie*, 2001) or based on real events (see *Mother Teresa*, 2003). When the viewer observes a character engaging in any of these processes, the viewer is likely to be in an absorbed trance-like state and thus more likely to be influenced by the values, beliefs, and behaviors being depicted in the film. This makes future healthy, moral action more likely for the viewer. At the very least, the viewer leaves the film with new ideas about moral values and ethical behavior.

It is common for viewers to feel elevation during an inspiring moment or scene, especially during or immediately after a film’s joyous conclusion. This also happens when a character accomplishes a goal, when characters cry out of joy, when crowds give a character a standing ovation (e.g., *Shine*, 1996), or when numerous characters are depicted as smiling and happy.

Genres of Positive Psychology Films

Some film genres are especially conducive to the production of positive psychology films, although every genre potentially can produce a film displaying human strengths. Table 1.3 lists the strengths often depicted in films of several popular genres, though note that we would not consider all the film examples in this chart stellar examples of the positive psychology movie. Drama is the most diverse category, and dramatic films offer the most opportunity for different strengths to evolve.

Some readers may question the distinction we make between religious and spiritual films. Religious films are more dogmatic and usually portray a particular religious or faith figure, group, or ritual, whereas spiritual films portray strengths that inspire and promote meaning, purpose, acceptance, and happiness. Spiritual films are the broader category, and some religious films can be very spiritual (see Chapter 12). Spiritual cinema is a relatively new genre for films, but it is becoming more accepted due to the work of the *Spiritual Cinema Circle*, a movie club that promotes films that tell us more about who we are and why we are here, and

films that leave us feeling better about being human after we view the film (Simon, 2002). Most of the films in this book, and many if not all of the strengths themselves, can be viewed as “spiritual,” depending on how one defines spirituality. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (2000), who have written about and discussed spiritual movies for over a decade, note that these films can recreate common dilemmas, expose universal truths, and provide illustrations of the ways in which characters learn about and engage in particular spiritual practices. The positive psychology film has significant overlap with these concepts; however, by definition, it employs discussion of specific human strengths and virtues based on current scientific understanding.

Table 1.3. Cinematic genres and corresponding strengths commonly portrayed.

Film Genre	Common Strength Depicted	Typical Film Example
Animation	Love, kindness, fairness, persistence	<i>Aladdin</i> (1992)
Comedy	Humor/playfulness	<i>Groundhog Day</i> (1993)
Action	Bravery, vitality	<i>Raiders of the Lost Ark</i> (1981)
Romance	Love, care	<i>Casablanca</i> (1942)
Drama	Hope, persistence, integrity	<i>Cool Hand Luke</i> (1967)
Documentary	Appreciation of beauty & excellence, citizenship	<i>March of the Penguins</i> (2003)
Fantasy	Creativity, curiosity, hope	<i>The Never Ending Story</i> (1984)
Western	Bravery, hope, humility	<i>3:10 to Yuma</i> (2007)
Suspense	Persistence, social intelligence	<i>Vertigo</i> (1958)
Horror	Bravery, persistence	<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922)
Religious	Hope, perspective, spirituality	<i>The Ten Commandments</i> (1956)
Spiritual	All	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)

Misconceptions of Positive Psychology Films

It is well known that films perpetrate misconceptions in their representation of psychopathology (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2005; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Misconceptions can be found in the depiction of strengths as well. In order to fully understand the characteristics of the positive psychology film, it is important to delineate what is *not* a positive psychology film.

Some films depict strengths but also confuse them, such as films that are overtly Pollyannaish, those that depict an unhealthy curiosity, and those that confuse mental illness with happiness, perpetuating the misconception that taking away one's mental illness takes away their happiness, as implied in *The Movie Hero* (2003).

Positive psychology films are not necessarily lighthearted. They can be dark, intense, and potentially upsetting or graphic as they drive home important issues of the struggle of humanity, suffering, and the painful acceptance of reality. “Darker” films such as *House of Sand and Fog* (2003) and *The Hours* (2002) are good examples of somber films with positive psychology themes.

There are films that emphasize the antithesis of a strength, but this is not always a disservice to positive psychology filmmaking. Positive psychologists know that negative emotions and unpleasant experiences *do* matter, and it is the integration of the pleasant and the unpleasant, the dark and the light, the comic and the tragic that allows us to map the ingredients for improving the human condition. These “shadow” or “dark side” films can teach us a great deal about a positive psychology strength by portraying the antithesis of the virtue or strength being considered. For example, films about impulse control disorders teach us about the strength of self-regulation. Films about narcissists tell us something about the strengths of humility and modesty. Pessimistic characters illustrate the importance of hope and optimism; from the angry and resentful we learn about the challenges of forgiveness and mercy. Films that portray the opposites of virtues and strengths can be useful teaching tools.

Applications in Pedagogic and Clinical Settings

Movies provide an excellent vehicle for exploring positive psychology theories, concepts, research, and application with both student and patient populations. Research generally supports the use of film as an adjunct in the classroom and the clinic. *Cinemeducation* is a term coined by Alexander, Hall, and Pettice (1994), referring to the use of movies in the education setting. It appears that virtually any student population can learn much from watching films that supplement, expand, and enhance what they are learning in the classroom. Some groups that have benefited include students in the fields of psychology (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990; Nelson, 2002; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2005), nursing (Raingruber, 2003), counselor education (Toman & Rak, 2000), and medicine (Alexander, 1995; Alexander & Waxman, 2000; Karlinsky, 2003).

Raingruber (2003) conducted a phenomenological study of graduate students and found that movies were effective in promoting reflection and producing empathy and they were an effective way of presenting ethical dilemmas for students to discuss and debate. Wilt, Evans, Muenchen, and Guegold (1995) found that the combination of movies and discussion significantly increased the empathy of students compared with controls, although empathy levels decreased to baseline by the end of the semester.

Promising research by Rashid (in press) found that character strengths and virtues could be systematically enhanced to promote well-being, and that gains were maintained over time in a study with undergraduate and graduate students who watched positive psychology movies (among other interventions). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) summarized the role of strengths in prevention, specifically the prevention of mental illness, and identified courage, optimism, faith, hope, honesty, and perseverance as a few of those strengths associated with prevention.

The term *cinematherapy* was coined by Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch (1990) to describe the use of movies in psychotherapy. While there are few controlled research studies on cinematherapy, there is a significant amount of anecdotal and case report data documenting its benefits in building hope, providing role models, identifying and reinforcing internal strengths, facilitating communication, and helping client’s prioritize values (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Hesley & Hesley, 1998; Schulenberg, 2003; Sharp, Smith, & Cole, 2002; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003).

Cinematherapy and cinemeducation both involve the use of movies as tools to enhance and supplement—but never replace—the activities that occur in the classroom or the clinic. In particular, positive psychology and any theory that relates to the good, engaged, or meaningful life plays well on the silver screen. For example, consider the work of Abraham Maslow

(1971) on self-actualization; this work forms the bedrock upon which the positive psychology movement builds. If a teacher or clinician is discussing the principles of self-actualization and is presenting the classic needs hierarchy, using film examples to illustrate characters interacting at (and perhaps stuck at) a need level adds a new dimension of learning for the student or patient. For example, compare Truman Burbank from *The Truman Show* (1998), a character clearly progressing on the path to self-actualization, with the adult male protagonist in Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005, France), a character who is at the bottom need level (physiological/ survival needs) and someone who sacrifices his own child for money after sneaking the child away from his girlfriend. Truman Burbank embodies many of the qualities that Maslow describes as characteristic of self-actualizing people, such as good concentration, self-awareness, honesty, growth choices, trusting of one's own judgment, and continual self-development of one's potentials. Bruno, the man who sells his child, has none of these features.

Moving Forward

The rise of independent cinema over the last two decades has led to the production of numerous films that examine the human condition, and watching some of these films makes us stronger. Until recently, these films were only available to the elite or dedicated moviegoer; now with the emergence of specialized online movie clubs (e.g., Film Movement; Ironweed Films; Spiritual Cinema Circle), such films are readily available through the internet to anyone. These DVD clubs send representatives to film festivals around the world to identify quality films produced by independent filmmakers that can be reproduced in quantity and delivered to one's doorstep. Major DVD delivery systems like Blockbuster and Netflix also give the public easy and quick access to Hollywood films and influential international films.

In the spirit of practical application that we adhere to in each of the strength chapters in this book, we offer some tips for moving forward.

1) *View more positive psychology movies.* Start with the exemplars, those films that are prototypes for the expression and use of a human strength. Pay particular attention to the work of auteur (author) directors who frequently portray the human condition and suggest how to improve it. Such directors are the dominant force in the inception, creation, and final product of any given film. Wim Wenders, Peter Weir, Mike Leigh, Richard Linklater, David Cronenberg, Jean Pierre-Jeunet, Zhang Yimou, and Tom Tykwer are some of today's best auteur directors; however, their work is not well known in the United States.

2) *Open yourself to the art and universality of movies.* Before watching a film, quiet yourself, and let go of the stress and worry from the day. Remind yourself that the movie you are about to see is actually a work of art, made possible by the hard work of hundreds or sometimes thousands of individuals working together. Good art is a sacred experience that touches that "unspoiled spot" inside all of us.

3) *Allow yourself to experience cinematic elevation.* Take pride in being stimulated, excited, and moved by a wide variety of movies. Notice the strengths and virtues portrayed on the screen, as well as each film's messages of transformation and redemption. Be open to ideas about making changes that will improve your life or the lives of others. Use the questions in Appendix A to help you along the way.

4) *Become aware of your own signature strengths.* Take online questionnaires from reliable sources (e.g., www.authentic happiness.com or www.strengthsfinder.com), and learn about your strengths by noticing which films and topics in this book most pique your interest.

5) *Connect.* One of the take home messages of positive psychologists is that "other people

matter” (Peterson, 2003). This is something inherent in the positive psychology film. Such films are about connecting more with oneself by actualizing one’s strengths and potential for meaning, connecting more with others, and connecting more deeply with the world. As you watch these films, think about ways to enhance your connections in these three areas.