

Can Movies Enhance Happiness?

Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding, *Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Virtues and Character Strengths*. Hogrefe and Huber Publishers, Cambridge, USA, 2008, ISBN 978-0-88937-352-5, 308 pp

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Plato called poetry a ‘false Siren’, the ‘ally of all that is low and weak in the soul against that which is high and strong.’ (Bywater 1920) The problem was that onlookers in the theatre would become emotionally involved in the psychic conflicts and suffering that was depicted, whereas it would have been better to view the human condition with more philosophical detachment. Plato thought that poetry nourished the childish part of the soul (Chriswold 2008). But Plato was also prepared to give the advocates of poetry an opportunity to show that poetry can be useful: “We will give her champions (advocates of poetry), not poets themselves but poet-lovers, an opportunity to make her defense in plain prose and show that she (poetry) is not only sweet—as we well know—but also helpful to society and the life of man.”

Aristotle took up Plato’s challenge and concluded: ‘A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action (...) with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.’ Much later writers such as Joseph Campbell (1949) and Bettelheim (1977) elaborated on this theme. Fiction can help resolve dilemma’s in our lives that we may not even be aware of. Drama may help readers come to terms with their existential position and can foster growth and well-being.

This classical detour is just to show that the authors of the book *Positive Psychology at the Movies* have taken on a classical theme, although they focus on the modern medium of movies. The first author is Ryan Niemiec, a psychologist practicing in St. Louis, and the film editor for PsycCRITIQUES. The second author, Danny Wedding, directs the Missouri Institute of Mental Health and is the 2008 President Elect for the APA Division of Media Psychology.

The central idea of the book is that psychology may have restricted itself too much in searching for ways to foster well-being. Oatley (2009) describes this sentiment in a recent movie review: ‘We tend to think of psychology as being based on methods such as experiments, questionnaires, and interviews. But what if our conception of methods is too limited? What if film were a psychological method?’ Niemiec and Wedding recommend

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watching movies for ‘enhancing contentment and satisfaction with the past, happiness in the present and optimism for the future.’

Niemiec and Wedding ignore all the work that is done on the therapeutic value of fiction and narratives, and start with a clean slate. They describe three different factors that could contribute to the happiness of onlookers. The first is described by Walt Disney who said that in planning a new picture, ‘we do not think of grown-ups or children, but just of that kind, clean, unspoiled spot down deep inside everyone of us, that the world has maybe made us forget, and maybe our pictures can help to recall.’ Niemiec and Wedding are outspoken in their defense of this claim: ‘Movies, especially positive psychology movies speak to that clean 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.’

Niemiec and Wedding do not trust the idea that movies alone can help viewers to reach the clean spot by themselves. Therefore, they educate the readers, i.e. potential movie viewers, about the work of Peterson and Seligman about character strengths and virtues. The strengths are described as a way to reach a life of pleasure, engagement and meaning, and for all 24 strengths they describe films that give a realistic portrayal of these strengths. The idea is that knowledge about character strengths will guide the way the viewer will interpret a ‘positive psychology movie’.

According to Niemiec and Wedding a deserves the classification “positive psychology movie” if the following criteria are fulfilled: (1) a balanced portrayal of a character displaying at least one of the 24 strengths categorized by Peterson and Seligman; (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 of mood in the film that is inspiring and uplifting.’

Niemiec and Wedding think that such movies can create the emotion of elevation and this in turn will make it more likely that the viewers will be influenced by the values, beliefs and behaviors being depicted in the film. These movies will give the viewer new ideas and will help to make future healthy action more likely. This can be described as a tripling down effect. The strengths that are portrayed in the film help the viewer to recognize such strengths inside themselves, so that they put the strengths to good use for their own lives, and so they feel better and more connected to people and the world.

The main strength of the book is that it offers an alternative idea of how to spread the ideas of positive psychology, because the positive psychologists often retort to the toolkit of negative psychology. It still is an open question whether this is the best way forward. It is refreshing to read about the positive effects of movies in an age in which psychologists predominantly study whether movies inspire people to smoke or to behave aggressively. Niemiec and Wedding rightly correct this negative bias. Another strength is that Niemiec and Wedding have classified hundreds of movies on the basis of character strengths.

The book also has some less fortunate points. The first is that the authors do not present any scientific data to support their claims about the therapeutic effects of watching films. They totally neglect the existing literature on the appreciation of art and fiction, that is relevant for their main points.

Another limitation is that the authors do not present any data on the system used to classify the strengths that are depicted in movies. My guess would be that the inter-rater agreement of this system would be modest at best. This judgment is based on a random selection of the five cheapest movie DVD’s available at a local shop. One of the films was *Atonement* that should depict the strength of love, but is about the imagined relationship of two people that should have survived the Second World War, but did not. This makes the

required realistic ‘depiction of obstacles’ not really inspiring. For me the movie was more an invitation to think about the impossibility of undoing the effects of some bad choices.

A last critical remark is about the described mechanism that allows people to profit from watching a positive psychology movie. Niemiec and Wedding assume that imitation and inspiration are most important. This may be questionable. In The Netherlands the newspaper *De Volkskrant* asked readers to describe instances in which watching a movie made their life richer. This yielded 50 very diverse results (Bergsma and De Greef 2009).

The mechanism of imitation and inspiration was apparent in 12 cases. For example, after watching *Amelie* a 17-old decided to do more chores in house for her parents and felt better because of it. Another viewer was not angry when his bicycle was stolen, but he followed the main character of *Happy-go-lucky* and concluded that he was sorry not to have been able to say goodbye to his beloved bike.

However, most reports about the positive effects of films are the result of an unpredictable interplay between the viewer and the content. One woman described how she could not stop weeping, after seeing *Bridges of Madison County*, but she did not understand why she was so moved this way. Many years later she fell in love with another man and she decided to watch *Bridges* again. She expected that this would give her the strength to stay with her husband and prevent her children having to grow up with divorced parents. ‘But after seeing the movie I was certain that I had to leave my suffocating marriage.’ In retrospect she considered this to have been a wise choice.

A last example shows that one movie can have a very significant impact. In a movie an autistic boy watches how a man wearing motor boots puts a newspaper over a wounded pigeon and stamps on it to release it from suffering. The boy goes home and does the same to his hamster. This may seem cruel but for one viewer this was a revelation. At the time she had lost a beloved one to suicide and was unable to cope. She tried to end her life in several ways, but after watching the autistic boy with his hamster, she realized she was imitating her lost friend, in an effort to get a grip on what she could not comprehend. This realization was the beginning of her recovery.

Niemiec and Wedding would probably not classify this movie as a “positive psychology movie”. Perhaps one could say that it portrayed a childish part of the soul, but the onlooker profited greatly. Such stories show that movies can enhance happiness and even save lives, and it would be interesting to know how common these effects are. Niemiec and Wedding have made the first steps on a possibly exciting journey.

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