

Silver Screen Metaphors: Film Use in the Context of Narrative Therapy with Substance Misusers

by Jason P. Austin



I have worked with several substance-misusing clients who, despite my best efforts, adamantly adhere to their problematic narrative and cannot participate in re-storying their experience in a meaningful manner. The purpose of this article is to outline an alternative technique of using films to help substance-misusing clients generate a positive metaphor for their lived experiences. Using this metaphor, the therapist and client can then engage in dialogue designed to create space for a re-storying of the client's lived narrative. This article explores the use of films and metaphors with reference to a case example, and explains how films can be synthesised with narrative therapy for substance-misusing people.

Keywords: Substance abuse, movie, film, metaphor, narrative therapy, re-storying

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'It sounds like, from the way you describe things, 'drinking' has been pushing you around for most of your life. Has there ever been a time when you caught drinking in a position where it wasn't able to push you around?' I ask Tasha¹, a thirty-year old working-class woman, who has a history of problem-drinking that spans most of her life.

'I don't understand the question. I have a disease and I need to learn how to live with it for the rest of my life', states Tasha. She stares at me in frustration as she sits with her hands clasped in front of her.

As a novice therapist, I have not had much success at externalising and re-storying attempts with substance-misusing clients. Consequently, it is extremely difficult for me to deconstruct the dominant, problematic narrative of these clients. Since the application of narrative therapy with substance misuse has been well explained (see Diamond, 2000), the problem is not with the client nor with the narrative technique, rather with my methods of employing it.

While frustrated with my lack of success using narrative therapy, I didn't give up. In fact, I had a surprising breakthrough when I asked one of my most challenging substance-misusing clients to watch a movie that I believed paralleled his dominant problem story. I was surprised by the amount of meaning he found in the film. I have come to call this story 'The Story of Bob'², one of my most challenging and positive experiences with narrative therapy. The purpose of this article is to explore this experience and to discuss the thesis that using films is a useful technique to aid in the re-storying process in narrative therapy.

The Story of Bob

'So I'm a decent person and have had some small success with my alcoholism over the years. So what! That has nothing to do with this disease that I have and how it dominates my life. I have been drinking for half a century. If there were a way to beat it, I would have done it by now. Are you even understanding me?' states Bob, 58, who has been drinking since he was eight years old.

I sit across from him feeling completely defeated as my attempt at deconstructing and reconstructing his drinking narrative fails like the countless ones before it. I start to feel hopeless and that maybe I would be better off as a used car salesman.

One weekend I watched the movie *300* at home with a group of friends. The story of King Leonidas and his 300 soldiers who stood against the military might of the Persian king Xerxes for three days was enthralling. During one of the intense fighting scenes, Bob suddenly entered my thoughts.

I thought, 'Oh great, now I'm bringing work into my personal time.'

I didn't immediately make the connection but later it shocked me how alike he and Leonidas were. Both of them were staunch in their beliefs and held an unyielding perception of their enemy. While Leonidas's perception was quite different from Bob's, they did appear to respond to people in the same manner – with conviction concerning their actions in relation to their enemies.

The next week, during my fourth session with Bob, we came to the same dead-end point where I have tried to re-story his experiences with drinking. When this attempt failed again, I had a sudden thought about the movie *300* and I remember thinking, 'Well, nothing else has worked'.

'Bob, I can see that I'm not totally understanding you, and both you and I are frustrated. So I'm going to ask you to do something that I don't normally do in this type of situation', I said, while hunched over in my chair gripping my appointment book.

'Okay', he replied with a hint of frustration.

'I watched a film this past weekend about the Spartans stand at the Gate of Thermopylae called *300*.

Have you ever seen it?' I asked.

'No I haven't. Is it any good?' he asked.

'I liked it, but the point isn't whether it's good or not. When I watched it, I thought about you, and I'm not sure why that is. Since I am having trouble understanding your story from your descriptions, maybe you could help me out. Would you be willing to watch this movie for me and tell me why you come to mind or if I'm just crazy?' I asked honestly.

'Well it couldn't hurt anything. Nothing else has worked', replied Bob.

'Thank you. Let's pick up here next week then and let me know what you think.' With that I finished up the session. I remember being nervous and not knowing where I was going with this film idea.

The following week Bob returned with an intense look on his face. I remember thinking that the movie may have been a waste of time.

'So what did you think? Am I crazy?' I asked Bob.

'It was amazing. I had to watch it a few times and that's when it hit me. The fight between the Spartans and Xerxes is like my fight with my addiction to alcohol. He has so many powerful and unique agents, such as the immortals of Asia and the other soldiers with their unique battle strategies that he uses to achieve victory.'

He pulled out a sheet of paper.

'I even took notes. His forces appear to attack the Spartans continuously day and night. When one force fails, Xerxes sends another. I feel as if I'm fighting all these forces like the Spartans were. And, like them, that the fight is never going to end', stated Bob. 'I really loved how the Spartans worked together and how they *lived for the fight and not for the victory*.'

I stared in disbelief. It was the first time that I had seen an opening for deconstruction. The thought of Bob utilising the Spartans' ability to seek honour through combat opened up space to deconstruct his dominant storyline of problem-drinking defeating him. Over the next few sessions, we engaged in meaningful dialogue that created a metaphor that characterised Xerxes' multiple forces as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. We were also able to re-story his failed attempts, using the movie *300* as an aid for Bob to derive meaning from his experiences. Bob never failed, he was still battling his problem-drinking, and like the Spartans, Bob lived for the fight and not for the victory.

I worked with Bob for over a year and we were able to externalise the most dangerous force in the hordes of addiction, in essence, addiction's immortals; that of anxiety. During our therapy, Bob entered a halfway house and eventually became a house manager over four local halfway houses. He required incoming individuals to watch the movie of *300* and instilled the notion that, 'Every Spartan protects the man to his left, as the man to his right protects him'. Bob reported in one session that he increased the

effectiveness of his program from 30% to 70% in the course of six months. Bob related this to it 'being good odds for any Greek'.

Many would say that this re-storying did not accomplish what they would consider a therapeutic change. Bob will still be in a lifelong fight against problem-drinking. However, I would argue that he now derives more meaning from his past experiences with drinking and uses more resources to improve his future. He describes his tough times in the future as a fight, but he is a Spartan; someone bred for fighting. In this re-storying of his experience, he wasn't stuck with 'addiction'; 'addiction' was stuck with him. And it was afraid.

A Review of Film Use in Therapy

After my therapy with Bob ended, I began to recommend films to other substance-misusing clients. While the film *300* only worked this well with Bob, I found other effective films, such as *Iron Man* and *Gladiator*. While the films varied, the themes did not. All of these films possess an overarching theme of someone battling and overcoming impossible odds. In my experience of using films, I found that they could assist clients in re-storying their experiences in facing impossible odds, such as substance misuse.

Clients are able to use films to generate a metaphor for their struggle. In that metaphor, space is created for the deconstruction of the dominant problem narrative, so therapist and client can work together in the space where re-storying is now possible. Using metaphors in therapy is not new. In fact, Rasmussen (1995) reviews the purpose of metaphor in psychoanalytic therapy with neurotic and borderline clients. Rasmussen found that 'healthier' individuals use metaphors differently than 'sick' individuals. However, Rasmussen follows a different theoretical framework. In viewing these clients through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, Rasmussen does not create space for clients to participate and display personal agency by re-storying their lived experiences. The difference between the technique of metaphor generation from film presented in this article and what Rasmussen presents is that the client is an active participant. The difference is one of theoretical orientation; using social constructionist instead of psychoanalytic theory. The theoretical basis of the technique presented in this article is discussed at length in a later section.

The use of media and the meaning of its interpretation are beginning to gain clinical interest (Cascio & Gasker, 2001; Dermer & Hutchings, 2000; Schulenberg, 2003; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003; as well as many others). This newfound interest has been presented in many different manners throughout scholarly literature.

Casio and Gasker (2001) reported a similar technique to 'The story of Bob' when explaining dangerous relationship patterns to their clients. The authors explain how relationships can be harmful using the film *Dracula* as a metaphor to describe parasitic and destructive relationships to their clients. Casio and Gasker go on to explain the nature of these relationships between *Dracula* and his victims with implications for therapy with clients with a history of unstable relationship patterns.

While Casio and Gasker's (2001) technique is similar to the one used in 'The story of Bob', they utilise this metaphor by *explaining* it to their clients and not allowing the client to *generate* their own metaphor. The myth of *Dracula* is used to characterise relationship patterns and is presented in a manner in which the client is not an active participant in its construction. Therefore, the method in which Casio and Gasker present their technique does not appear to be consistent with social constructionism and narrative therapy in which the client would display personal agency in the construction of the therapeutic metaphor.

Other clinicians have reported similar positive results with the use of films in therapy. Schulenberg (2003) reports that there is a growing interest among therapists in using films. Films can serve as a form of visual metaphor. Schulenberg reports that, 'Movies as visual metaphor can serve as an agent of therapeutic change' (p. 37). While the term 'therapeutic change' is more closely associated with traditional treatment, visual metaphors can essentially serve the same purpose in narrative therapy for substance misusers.

Schulenberg (2003) reports that while the use of films has been found favourable, no empirical data has yet to be published concerning the techniques. Empirical research, as the next step, is needed to evaluate the place of film in therapeutic treatment. This article places film in the context of narrative therapy for substance misusers by explaining its use in terms of a rudimentary technique in a later section.

While there is an abundance of literature on metaphors and the use of films in therapy, there is little literature published synthesising these topics with narrative therapy. Beaudoin (2005) discusses how films and media can be used to explore how people might react to situations. Within a narrative framework, Beaudoin deconstructs publicised reactions by comparing films and fictional film characters to lived experiences of real people. In this way, Beaudoin co-creates a new storyline in which the client has access to greater personal agency and does not idealise the responses of fictional movie characters.

Examining the Theoretical Consistency of Film Use in Narrative Therapy

Beaudoin's (2005) use of films in narrative therapy is similar to 'The Story of Bob' in that the client's generated metaphor of films was the target for exploration. While Beaudoin's technique implies that films set a gold standard for narrative intervention, the focus was on the client's generated metaphor of a movie and not solely on the therapist's interpretation. However, I would be concerned to have Bob generate a metaphor by himself without some reflective conversation between him and me. Framing the therapeutic dialogue of metaphor construction in this light, would my approach to using films be consistent with social constructionism and narrative therapy? To answer this question, a review of the theoretical basis of narrative therapy is warranted.

According to Freedman and Combs (1996), social constructionism theorises that reality is constructed through the use of language. Every time discourse is taking place between two people, a reality is being created. This is consistent with White and Epston's (1990) statement:

We have considered the proposal that persons give meaning to their lives and relationships by storying their experience and that, in interacting with others in the performance of these stories; they are active in the shaping of their lives and relationships. (p. 11.)

From this standpoint, social constructionism and narrative therapy assume that people make sense of their lived experiences by organising their stories into coherent accounts, which they can use to interpret future events (White & Epston, 1990). According to White and Epston, if we take a social constructionist perspective, we assume that problems arise out of problematic narratives.

Consequently, narrative therapy consists of generating healthier stories that still resonate with lived, perhaps forgotten, experiences (Diamond, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). In other words, therapy generates new meaning of clients' lived experiences over the dominant problem narrative that they present with in order to generate more personal agency in how future stories are created and acted out. If a person watches a movie, such as *The Passion of The Christ* and views their life, behaviour, and actions with new purpose and meaning, one could make the argument that re-storying of their personal narrative did occur.

Films can generate metaphors that assist in altering the meaning of clients' narratives in therapy (Schulenberg, 2003). This technique can be effective when used with a deconstructive stance. Freedman and Combs (1996) explain deconstruction as attempts by the therapist to highlight the 'gaps' and 'ambiguities' in clients' personal narratives with a goal of helping these clients to consider alternative meanings of their lived experiences.

I would theorise that using films as a visual metaphor assists in spotting these gaps and ambiguities. Indeed, Moore (1998) states, 'The use of visual metaphor offers one process through which the person can move to a spiritual level, discover meaning, and experience life as worthwhile and meaningful' (p. 85). Consistent with this statement, it would appear that Bob formed a connection with the character Leonidas. This connection created space that allowed Bob and I to highlight the gaps and ambiguities and generate a common understanding of his experiences as highlighted by the movie *300*. This allowed for greater rapport between us in subsequent sessions.

Through our discussion, Bob and I were able to re-story his experience through deconstructing the experiences associated with his substance misuse. It is important to note that Bob generated *his own metaphor* from the film and did not adopt one that I put forth. After watching the film, Bob articulated how the film moved him, and together we co-authored a new narrative that highlighted his personal agency. Adopting Freedman and Combs' (1996) stance that 'stories have many possible meanings' (p. 47), Bob and I used his generated metaphor from the film *300* to bring forth a more positive meaning to his story.

However, my experience with Bob planted a seed of concern about how he, and other substance misusers like him, describe themselves. After reading Hoffman (1990) and how she explained her journey towards social constructionism, I started to wonder if the dominant rhetoric that exists in the mental health field towards substance misuse today (for example, addiction, disease, and so on) could at times

support the problem instead of solving it. The rhetoric that describes the problem as the person, such as, 'I'm an addict,' or, 'I have a disease,' could be more imprisoning than freeing for some substance misusers who adopt these descriptors of themselves as truths.

This is, however, complex territory³. Some substance-misusing clients who adopt the 'I have a disease' rhetoric, find this significantly helpful. Indeed, many have been successful in reclaiming their lives from substances through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) using such understandings. To in any way cast doubt on their conclusions of 'being an addict' or 'having a disease' could significantly increase their risk of relapse, and could separate them from supportive communities assisting them to live lives free from substances (see White, 1997). For those who do not identify with being an addict, however, an alternative rhetoric may be helpful and effective. And whatever rhetoric is used, non-punitive attitudes to relapse may be significant.

Van De Mark (2007) conducted a mixed methods study which found that punitive policies towards relapse did not help in the recovery of women substance misusers. Van De Mark's (2007) study highlights the importance of empowerment and self-agency in substance misuse therapy and the issues that arise with traditional therapy policies and programs using traditional rhetoric. The participants of this study also expressed how such policies as withholding housing and cash assistance due to a history of relapse proved to be a barrier to treatment instead of encouraging it.

The film *300* created space for Bob and I to explore alternative explanations of his lived experiences with substance misuse. It would seem that using film to generate externalising metaphors could be helpful when working with clients who under the sway of dominant problem narratives concerning substance misuse. This technique can assist both the therapist and the client to create space together for deconstruction. Through this process, the therapist and client can then work to re-story the client's experience using the characteristics gleaned from the client's connection to the film.

From Theory to Practice: Using Film in Narrative Substance Misusing Therapy

The process of co-creating alternative metaphors through films can be effective with clients who describe the dominant problem story as negatively framing their lives in ways that leave little room for personal agency (White & Epston, 1990). From such a negative framing of their behaviour, these clients often have little control over the process of authoring their own narrative.

As previously discussed, films may help these clients by creating space in which to deconstruct their problematic narratives in order to author more positive ones. Using films in narrative therapy can be done in a variety of ways and is not limited to the examples listed within this article. Any therapist can use films in this manner, as long as they adhere to the theoretical underpinnings of narrative therapy as previously discussed.

Step One: Exploring Films and Film Characters

The first step is to explore and discover films and characters that the client identifies with. There is no limitation to the types of films and characters that can be used and no specific theme that the films or characters need to follow. It is only important that the client finds meaning in the film or character used.

This conversation does not always happen smoothly. In fact, many substance-misusing clients will not really understand the purpose of such questions in therapy. This can be especially true of clients who have previously received treatment for their substance misuse and/or participated in a traditional recovery program. Indeed, after reading Berg and Reuss (1998), who discuss substance misuse treatment using solution-focused-brief-therapy, one can see how previous treatment can create suspicion towards therapists' use of techniques not included in mainstream substance misuse treatment.

To help minimise the problems that such suspicion can cause, I started to make statements like:

'I have some questions to ask that you may not have been asked before, and it may seem to be a little strange to be asked them, considering why you're here. Would it bother you if we briefly discussed these questions instead of what we have been discussing?'

This can help ease suspicion and also achieve active participation from the client, since this is essentially asking their permission to explore different concepts.

The next question that the therapist can ask will be, 'What is your favourite film?' but it can be asked in several different forms, each of which will often achieve desired results. An example of this question in different form is presented here with the notion of superheroes. I have started asking, 'Who is your favourite superhero?' to some clients who I believe would benefit from such an exploration. Then the client and I explore films with superhero themes that are relevant and that the client can relate to.

The films and characters listed by the client could be used for the technique or be used to start dialogue between the therapist and the client about similar films that could prove more useful. It is important that this conversation about films offers space for the client to participate in the use of the technique and not suggested as a general, problem-specific intervention.

Step Two: The Search for Meaning

The next step in this technique is to explore the characteristics of the film or character that the client has listed and/or surfaced in the subsequent dialogue. The purpose of this step is to shift the dialogue between the therapist and client from one concerning just films and characters to the meaning that the client has found in them. This shift can be achieved by asking process questions focussing on the characteristics of the film or film characters.

In the superhero example previously discussed, questions can be asked such as, 'What is it about this superhero that you admire so much?' and, 'How would the superhero handle difficult situations such as the one we have been discussing?'

These questions tease out the specific characteristics that the client admires. Often, these characteristics are values that the client holds on a deep, emotional level. In the 'The story of Bob' Bob holds very close a value of never giving up. The film *300* simply highlighted this value.

It is important during this step to not get lost in the glamour of the film and/or film character that the client has given. As Beaudoin (2005) points out, clients can get wrapped up in the actions and traits of film characters, instead of using the film and/or film character to create their own metaphor. Indeed, for the superhero example previously explained, it is important that a conversation between the therapist and client take place about how superheroes almost always possess some magical power or resources that enables them to succeed. Often normal human beings, such as the client, are not able to succeed in the same way.

However, this point should not be considered negatively. It is important to utilise the personal characteristics of these superheroes, or any other character the client has identified with, rather than with their superhuman abilities or other unattainable attributes. These personal characteristics can be explored and identified by the therapist and client. Questions such as, 'While it is helpful to have super powers, how does this hero make the tough decisions that generates your admiration?' can help the client identify their own characteristics that are similar to the character.

In this example, stepping away from superhuman strengths can assist the client to generate meaning from a specific type of fictional story. In 'The Story of Bob', the Spartans from the film *300* bravely faced a military force many times their own number. The use of special effects and impressive

fighting style was not important to Bob. The Spartans near 'superhero' status did not interest him. Instead, he described their bravery, the ever-evolving strategies that they employed, and their 'never retreat, never surrender' mentality. Bob was able to form a connection to the main character as he realised he had embodied this same mentality towards his problem drinking for fifty years and had never realised it.

Step Three: Deconstruction and Re-Storying Discourse

The next step of this technique is to fill in the gaps and ambiguities in the client's story. The therapist and client should now have an opportunity to deconstruct the client's problem narrative using the client's connection to the film. This presents an opportunity as the client and therapist can stand on common ground through the viewing of the film and with the meaning co-constructed through dialogue. Staying with the superhero example, one question could be:

'Did you realise that you were displaying the same tenacity in fighting substance misuse as the hero did in fighting his enemy?'

This question allows the therapist and client to find unique outcomes associated with their substance misuse that could have been considered random or unimportant.

During this step, the therapist can also ask landscape of identity questions (White, 2007). White explains the definition of the landscape of identity as '... composed of "what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think, or feel"' (Bruner, 1986, as cited in White, 2007, p. 78). These questions often serve to explore unique outcomes in a manner that gives the client agency.

Staying with the superhero example, questions such as, 'Since your actions are consistent with the superhero, what might this say about you?' serve to tease out a more positive narrative of the client's experiences.

When using the superhero example, it is important to highlight that the only difference between the client and the hero is the presence of superpowers, or the availability of extraordinary resources. By contrast, the values that the client holds can be very similar to those of the superhero. These values, when highlighted and brought into context, can change the meaning associated with the client's problem narrative (White, 2007).

Step Four: Re-membering the Film

The last step in this technique is to hold what White (2007) calls 're-membering conversations.' White describes these as, 'purposive re-engagements with the history of one's relationships with significant figures and with the identities of one's present life and projected future' (p. 129).

In other words, re-membering allows clients to view their past experiences through the lens of the new meaning that they have given their narrative. While this can be through the actions of family members, loved ones, and meaningful exchanges, the important figures that constitute the re-membering process don't have to be directly known. They can consist of film, book and comic book characters, as well as anybody who is personally meaningful to the newly-generated narrative of the client.

Holding this conversation will help the therapist and client to interpret previous experiences within the newly-discovered values drawn from films or film characters. This conversation can help continue this new positive interpretation in potential future events. In the 'Story of Bob' these questions, adapted from White (2007) were:

'At some level you recognised this Spartan bravery when it was presented to you, How?'

'Can you give me an example in your life that would help me comprehend that you knew what to do with this Spartan Bravery?'

'This Spartan bravery didn't just roll off you, rather you managed to take it and soak it into you. I am very curious as to how you knew to respond to Spartan bravery like that.'

These questions, besides re-storying the client's personal narrative, also highlight the personal agency they have displayed when using these values.

Conclusion

There are many different ways in which therapists can use films in narrative therapy with substance-misusing clients. And, as demonstrated above, the subsequent discussions can be conducted in a manner consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism. In turn, the client can experience personal agency as she or he constructs a more helpful personal narrative.

Virtually any type of movie can be used to generate useful metaphors. In the 'Story of Bob' and, to some extent, in the superhero example, the films can be said to possess a battle theme. While this can be very helpful for many clients as they often see their struggle with addiction as a battle, this does not always have to be the case. In another substance misuse case, a client watched *The Bucket List* and then promptly wrote out a list of what he would do when he 'kicked addiction'. When he wrote out the list, he realised that he had already accomplished over half of the items. Discussing this opened space to re-story how he had been attributing meaning to his actions and behaviours.

If clients participate in choosing the film, they may feel more committed to the re-storying process. While narrative therapy is context-specific, I encourage any therapist working with a substance-misusing client who is adamantly adhering to a problematic narrative, to consider the use of films to assist in creating space for deconstructing and re-storying their dominant problem narrative.

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Notes

1. Tasha is a pseudonym to protect her confidentiality and the dialogue given is not verbatim but rather a composite of my experience with her.
2. Bob is a pseudonym to protect his confidentiality. The dialogue expressed is not verbatim but a composite of my experience with him.
3. For more discussion of narrative approaches to 'addiction' and the complexities involved see the writings of the Deconstructing Addiction League: <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/deconstructing-addiction.html>.

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