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# So, How Do You Feel About That Scene?

## Cinema therapy is coming soon to an analyst's couch near you. We got an exclusive sneak preview.

**BY JUSTIN BERTON**

Sitting in a Berkeley bakery one morning last summer, I came across a flier: "Have you ever left a movie theater full of emotions, insights, and inspiration?" it asked. "Did you want to share your impressions and feelings right away? Did the movie make you reflect on your own life experiences?"

I chewed on my muffin and read on. "Then you might be interested in taking this a step further by making use of the transformational power certain films could have for you when you take advantage of their impact. Cinema therapy offers some tools for this process."

Someone had actually coined the phrase "cinema therapy." The flier was decorated in small spirals surrounded by squiggly sun

Claudia Ward

**Birgit Wolz is one of a small but ostensibly growing number of psychologists who tap Hollywood to help patients reflect on their own lives.**

**Why had I cried for Sean Penn? Was I actually**

rays, the sure mark of New Age hooey. There was a picture of psychotherapist Birgit Wolz, giving the camera a smile that can only be described as the Therapist Knows Best Gaze. Immediately, she looked like a story to me: The shrink who prescribes movies. How groovy. How laid-back. How Berkeley.

"Used as part of psychotherapy," her flier continued, "cinema therapy is an innovative method based on traditional therapeutic principles. Even outside a therapist's office, following certain guidelines for choosing films and watching them consciously can support personal and spiritual growth."

Now I was laughing -- this was

**mother?**

**I felt groggy, but aware … my God, I'd just said aloud that I had melded with Tom Cruise.**

**I was conflicted and Brandoesque, I realized, while my Higher Self was like Depp's Don Juan.**

Details

**News Category:** Investigative

reading-the-goofy-ass-fliers-in-a-Berkeley-bakery therapy. What really got me was the notion of a licensed therapist sending real-life patients with real-life problems to search for real-life solutions at a Tom Cruise matinee. The movie industry, as many a critic has pointed out, tends to serve life in a bowl with whipped cream and a supersweet cherry for the drive home. The recipe rarely changes. Even an ambitious script such as *Adaptation*, which claims to challenge the formula, ends only after the protagonist experiences a sobering epiphany -- love thyself, and ye shall be loved -- which is then punctuated by a ride into

the sunset.

Later that day I called around and found that cinema therapy had been in practice for about fifteen years, and that Wolz was the Bay Area's go-to film shrink. She hosted group sessions where people paid to sit and discuss the feelings evoked by movies such as *About Schmidt*. She taught a cinema therapy class at JFK University in Orinda, and had recently completed the manuscript for her book on the topic, *eMotion Picture Magic*, which she expects will be published in about six months. Recently, *The Therapist*, a California trade magazine to 25,000 family therapists, had asked Wolz to pen a movie column. Clearly, her brand of treatment was spreading.

To buy into cinema therapy, a client needed to buy into Carl Jung. In fact, were he alive today, Jung might argue that movies display his theory of archetypes perfectly: They're literally projected onto a gigantic screen. Jung said man was born with a "preconscious psychic disposition that enables him to react in a human manner," and that all the mind really does to make sense of the world is seek out a few characters to project its images onto. In other words, though the details of our lives may change, we tend to relate them to the same ol' story lines. Just like Hollywood.

Dr. Irene Goldenberg, a family psychologist and professor emeritus at UCLA, has been critical of cinema therapy. The technique, she says, is not only lazy, but also dangerously entangles the counselor's life with the client's. "It's like a therapist telling a client to go read a book that the therapist was really moved by or that meant a lot to them, when it's not about the therapist's feelings and experiences; it's about the client's," she says.

In her book, Wolz lays out dozens of films and the emotional themes she plucked from them. For example, she writes, "Anyone who is struggling with a life transition and feels scared of an uncertain future might benefit from watching *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Because the plot shows a courageous woman rebuilding her life after a devastating loss, several of my clients found it to have positive therapeutic effects."

But was the lead character actually "courageous"? Or merely entitled and then disappointed, which results in something closer to pathetic? I hadn't yet spoken to Wolz, but a quick Web search indicated she'd been written about several times, and usually in a tone that I'd already pegged for her: Nutty, with good intentions. So I dropped the idea and moved on.

A few months later Wolz e-mailed the *Express* to pitch a monthly movie column. Per protocol, the editorial coordinator forwarded the e-mail to an editor, who, finding it humorous, printed it and posted it outside his office door. Cynical journalists like to make fun of silly column pitches.

But with Wolz back in the fray, I mentioned to the same editor that I actually had looked into writing about cinema therapy. The brainstorming session that resulted led to an idea. I would be her patient: Buy the popcorn, lie down on the couch, and experience for myself -- or not -- the "transformational power" of cinema.

Wolz was game. Although she wasn't paid for her services, she agreed to participate, and let me tape-record our sessions, which took place weekly over the course of two months at her Piedmont Avenue office. Before we began, I assured the therapist that all the heavy lifting on my psyche had been done years ago, so we'd probably just crack the surface -- if even that could be cracked by a handful of movies.

"This is an interesting way to get into it," she commented in one of our first conversations. "Most people just ask me what movies their readers should go see."

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***Mystic River***
**Or: Did you feel guilt when Sean Penn rushed the crime scene?**

Wolz' second-story office looks like the cozy middle room of a typical San Francisco flat: asymmetrical, with Victorian windows and a slightly tilted floor, thanks to the century-old foundation. The wooden bookshelves are lined with dozens of action figures, from Lisa Simpson to Darth Vader -- all the better to practice on before you confront

your real-life dark force or estranged sister. In cinema therapy, though, we'd be assuming the feelings and traits of the characters on the silver screen. "We'll even do some light hypnotherapy," Wolz promised. "That'll come later."

First, we sized each other up. Wolz has the well-practiced nod of a therapist who is used to listening. She grew up in Berlin and speaks with a made-for-TV German accent. We sat in cushy leather chairs facing each other a few feet apart, knee-to-knee, and did the "So ... here we are" pause.

We smiled and exhaled.

"What are some of your favorite movies?" she asked. After a little thought, I answered: *Shawshank Redemption*. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. *Barfly*. *The Princess Bride*. Recently I'd seen *Mystic River*, I added, and was blown away.

"Tell me more about that."

The whole thing, I said. Most major Hollywood pictures don't deal with molestation, for one. The subject was dark and the characters were gray. And the ending left a strange, unresolved taste in my mouth. The story had something to say about life, I told her.

"What scene in *Mystic River* was powerful for you?"

I considered it. The one scene that really got me, I told her, was when Sean Penn learns his daughter's body has been found and the police have to hold him back from the crime scene. "He just keeps screaming: 'Is my daughter in there? Is my daughter in there? Is my daughter in there?'" I said. "And he's devastated. ... I mean, I could feel the tears well up, and I can't remember the last time I cried in a movie theater."

"You cried?"

"Well, yeah. A little. I didn't sob or anything. Just kind of welled up."

"Why?" Wolz asked.

Why had I cried right then? I didn't know. A parent had just realized his kid was dead, and that's a heavy moment for anyone. Penn was so convincing, I told her.

"But why did you have such a strong reaction to this scene as opposed to other scenes?"

I thought about it before responding: I empathized with Penn's character, I told the therapist. I could recall my mother saying hundreds of times that if she ever lost a child, she'd rather die.

"Did you feel guilt?" Wolz interjected.

Sure. Guilt was my mother's money card, and like most inflicters of guilt, she played it from the bottom of the deck. But she was so dramatic about this if-one-of-my-kids-dies thing that I'd stopped listening. It was just her going on again. Come to think of it, I'd stopped listening to many of my mother's wilder declarations. She'd been pining for a grandchild for years now, and was prone to saying things such as "If you have a kid, I'll live in your basement to help you raise it." When these one-liners came out, I told Wolz, I would feel my eyes start to roll. Call it a small sense of resentment, I said.

Wolz liked this assessment, and repeated it back to me with some analysis: When I cried watching Sean Penn, she said, I was empathizing with my mother's fear and horror at the prospect of losing a child. I'd let down the resentment barrier long enough to connect with that deep sense of loss, and when I did, it was saddening; that's why I cried. It was a real moment for me, she said, not just a throwaway clip.

This was followed by a realization: I didn't always empathize with my mom, and in that sense, I told Wolz, I felt like I was a bad son. "That's your Inner Critic speaking," she said, nodding.

Yeah, the Inner Critic. He'd been here for a while, I said. Then I laughed.

"What's so funny?" the therapist asked.

On a trip to Europe a few years back, I was visiting the Sistine Chapel, shoulder to shoulder with a hundred others, looking up at Michelangelo's awe-inspiring masterpiece. I mean, this was one of the greatest works of art ever produced, and after a few minutes, I started thinking, 'Man, I need to stop watching TV and start doing something with my life. Maybe take up painting.' Instead of taking in this wonderful work of art, I just started obsessing about how I'm never going to paint a Sistine Chapel. How there's not enough time to learn to paint that well.

"Wow!" Wolz said. "Now *that's* an Inner Critic!"

We decided that simply acknowledging my Inner Critic was enough for now; we could come back to it later.

We moved on to *The Station Agent*, another recent favorite. I told Wolz why: The dwarf. I'd forgotten he was a dwarf. Halfway through the film I lost track of his size, or lack thereof, and became fascinated with his character, which, it turned out, was the point of the movie. Feeling moved, I said something befitting a therapist's office: "Underneath it all, we're really all just beating hearts and minds."

Wolz asked me what I'd felt just now. An expansion, I told her.

"A feeling of love?" she asked.

Sure. Nonjudgment. Acceptance. Yes, love.

"That expansion," Wolz explained, "the movie helped you to feel that. That's a place to build on. That's a place you might want to make more a part of your life. If we focus on that, we can transfer it into the world outside."

She returned to *Mystic River*. "One movie provoked your limitations, and another showed you your capacity to move beyond it." Within the course of forty minutes, she explained, I'd bashed myself for not being a better son, and then recalled the joy I felt watching *The Station Agent*. Wolz suggested that the next time my Inner Critic arose, I should consider my reaction to the dwarf and focus on the positive. "It may be," she said, "you've found

a natural antidote to your Inner Critic."

I liked the idea, but it seemed a stretch. I mean, was I supposed to think about a dwarf walking along the train tracks every time I got down on myself? As far as I could tell, we'd simply talked about the films I'd seen recently and then dredged up some dime-store analysis. I have friends who could do that for free.

But now Wolz was ready to prescribe, and I was curious what movies she thought would heal me. She reminded me that to get the most out of cinema therapy, I had to develop "conscious awareness." Instead of just gobbling Jujubes and waiting for the car chases or sex scenes, I had to engage, watch without judgment, and be aware of my responses. She gave me a guidelines sheet with suggestions such as "Notice whether any aspect of the film was especially hard to watch. Could this be related to something that you might have repressed?"

After a moment's consideration, Wolz prescribed *The Last Samurai*. The revulsion must have shown on my face. "Do you have strong reservations against *The Last Samurai*?" she asked.

I said, yes, the thought of Tom Cruise bringing me enlightenment provoked a sense of resistance. But I also realized that resisting your counselor's suggestion could be seen as failure to participate, a sign of further dysfunction -- I knew this from *The Sopranos*. So I immediately doubled back and said it would do just fine. That's why I'm here: to be open to the idea that Tom Cruise might help heal me at the bargain rate of $9.50 for two hours.

That night, I drove beneath a billboard at the corner of 51st Street and Broadway in Oakland, where the bearded and starry-eyed Cruise gazed down at me, his sword raised, just waiting to poke inside my head.

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***The Last Samurai***
**Or: Becoming Tom Cruise's character**

It was pouring when I arrived at Wolz' office one week later. I hung up my peacoat, warmed my hands, took a seat, and told her it was too damn hard watching a movie

with "conscious awareness." Knowing that your psyche was about to get probed based on what you saw or didn't see in a film was entirely unsettling for a neurotic like me. I'd found myself mining the opening credits for clues.

At every plot twist, I told her, I wondered what I was supposed to see, then wondered what I'd say about it, then wondered what Wolz would see in me. In short, I'd had a semiparanoid episode inside the crowded theater, and by the way, Tom Cruise was still an overly earnest weenie.

Wolz smiled at this.

But there was one scene I got into, I said.

"Wonderful," she said. "Tell me about it."

Okay, so Tom Cruise is this alcoholic, a decorated soldier from the Civil War with no one left to fight, no reason to live. But he gets hired as a mercenary to go to Japan and help the national army wipe out the pesky samurai. After the samurai thoroughly stomp the army, they take a wounded Cruise hostage, then nurse him back to health. Naturally, he takes a liking to this society full of honor and integrity, which he lacks, and so he takes up the local tradition of sword fighting.

But each time he tries, he gets his ass kicked, and the villagers get a good laugh at the white boy's expense. So one day he's working away on his sword fighting, and getting beaten for the umpteenth time, when one of the kinder villagers approaches him and says, "You got too many minds. You need to have no mind."

Wolz recalled the scene.

"And I was sitting there thinking, 'He's right. He's got too many minds. He's thinking about what everyone in the village is thinking about him. What he needs to do is focus, find his stroke, and not give a rat's ass about all these other people's minds. It's sort of like using the Force.'"

Wolz repeated my words back to me to make sure she had it right. "Why do you think this stood out for you?"

I already knew the answer. I'd been worried about writing this story. It's the kind of thing that works only when it's totally honest -- and I felt blocked. Reluctant. I'd been thinking way too much about the people who would read it, who would have their chance to mock me. The readers are the villagers, I said, and I'm Tom Cruise. Wasn't that terrible?

"It sounds like the Inner Critic is at work," Wolz said. "The Inner Critic is causing the blockage."

Then she asked whether I'd reacted negatively to any of the characters.

I shrugged. There were the token bad guys, I said, but I didn't have a seriously negative reaction.

She repeated the question.

Okay, so the bad guy I liked least was the Japanese ambassador who purchases the howitzers. He was going to slaughter the samurai with the new machine guns, and yeah, I guess that was pretty deplorable.

"Why?"

"His ignorance. He couldn't see that the Japanese were importing a new devastation to their culture."

Wolz probed further. "His ignorance ... I'm wondering if ignorance was something that was not appreciated in your household." Was ignorance part of my shadow? she asked.

"Shadow," Wolz had explained, is that part of your being that's been denied, covered up, forgotten. And in the long run, repression of the shadow can damage the soul. Jung described it as a person's "dark side," the traits he tries to exorcise, when in reality he'd be better off owning up to the flaws and giving the shadow some respect. A good way to understand your shadow, Jung said, is to make a list of things you dislike about other people. By doing so, you tend to reveal what you dislike about yourself.

By citing the Japanese ambassador's ignorance as bad trait number one, I'd given Wolz an area to investigate. She offered her analysis: Whenever I feared I was going

to appear ignorant -- as I did sitting down to write about my therapy sessions -- I tried to deny it. And when I failed to give myself compassion to counter those feelings, it led to my feeling blocked. And blocked, Wolz said, was no place to be.

I suddenly felt humble and lacking in confidence, and told her so. To get us out of this mess, Wolz suggested we try hypnotherapy. She directed me to close my eyes and sink into my chair. She then raised her voice to a little girl's pitch and lowered the volume to a near-whisper. "Feel your tensions go inward," she said in her light voice. "Feel yourself relax."

In a few minutes I was calm.

"Now, in your mind's eye, visit a peaceful place," she said. I imagined being wrapped in a white duck-feather comforter. I was warm from head to toe. I had a smile on my face. I looked like a burrito.

Wolz asked me to invite my Inner Adviser to the comforter, someone compassionate who knows everything about me. I did so, feeling dreamy, and even a little stoned. Wolz assured me I was in a safe place and in her soothing voice invited the two of us to "enter this world of this film, *The Last Samurai*, and pick a scene."

The sword-fight village scene.

"Smell the air around you," Wolz said. "What do you smell?"

It's fragrant, and flowery, and cool.

"Describe the scene," Wolz said.

Tom Cruise and this guy. They're just going back and forth, fighting in front of the villagers. Cruise is really trying to have no mind.

"Where are you?"

With the villagers.

"Now, it doesn't matter what the real movie did," Wolz said. "You just go on in your own unfolding here. ...

What's happening inside him?"

He's just responding. He's just ... being.

"Just being," Wolz repeated, "yeah."

Moving back and forth, as if they're one.

"Yeah, good, okay. ... What's going on inside him? ... Is it like a force? An invisible force?"

Yes, like a force. They're just ... connected.

"In the imaginary world, everything is possible," Wolz said. "With your mind's eye, now ... become the Tom Cruise character."

I imagined my body lifting out of the crowd of villagers, who now were all frozen in time. I could see Tom crouching in a swords-ready stance. He was wearing a brown *gi*. From above the crowd I floated, guiding myself down, and melding with the sword fighter. "What's that feel like?" Wolz asked.

A sensation of merging ... both sides of my body.

"How do you feel?"

Very centered.

"Do you like that?"

Yes. The movements. They're just coming out. ... We're moving back and forth with ease.

"Stay with that. Carry that centeredness into a scene in your real life, now ... where you see yourself. Maybe you're playing sports. Maybe you're writing."

Writing. I'm in front of my computer ... it's all very fluid ... there's an ease. It's centered.

"So is this a situation where the writer's block could come in? Or are you beyond it?"

Beyond it.

Wolz now wanted me to seek out my Inner Critic, and feel

supported by the Inner Adviser's presence. "What's the Inner Critic look like?" she asked.

A fireball.

"Where is it?"

In the belly.

"Is that disturbing?"

Yes ... it's difficult.

"You would like to let go of it, I assume? Or would you like to dissolve it?"

Yes, dissolve it.

Wolz asked me to ask my Inner Adviser to place a "magic hand" on my fireball to help dissolve it, "until there's nothing there."

A few minutes went by before I spoke. I'd zoned out. "Feels like a lot of it's dissolved," I said, mumbling, "but not all of it."

"That's fine," Wolz assured me. "It's how you use what you just learned."

Still in her light girly voice, Wolz whispered how I could transfer this lucid feeling into my daily life. "Whenever you sit at your computer in the future and this sense of block arises, you enter into your Inner Movie ... that scene where you got in touch with that connectedness, that flow, that movement, that openness, the creativity inside you -- those words will come out and that distracting Inner Critic will disappear."

With that, she counted down from five to one. "When you open your eyes you'll be ready to enter the world again."

I felt groggy, but aware, as if I'd taken a twenty-minute nap. And, *my God*, I'd just said aloud that I had melded with Tom Cruise. Now I felt a little sheepish. Wolz wanted me to focus on the lesson, rather than get hung up on this Cruise fixation. "It's important to bridge this scene into your consciousness," she said. This was a tool, she

said, that could dismantle my writer's block. I could recall it at any moment, if I remained open to it.

Before leaving, I had to ask: Why *The Last Samurai*? Wolz explained that it was a good example of the Hero's Journey, as plotted by the philosopher Joseph Campbell. It's a simple arc she wanted me to see: Man acknowledges his ills and sets out on a journey to right them. Man finds mentor, then suffers challenges beyond his awareness. Once he gains awareness, he overcomes and sets out anew. It sounded like most one-man movies, I said, from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* to *Rocky*. In fact, it sounded like most stories.

"Unconsciously," Wolz reasoned, "moviemakers have followed this path."

I told Wolz I had considered ending our one-on-one sessions. The idea of writing about my flaws was growing less attractive. Writing about other people's flaws was much more entertaining. Then again, since I'd started cinema therapy, even my once-skeptical co-workers had become strangely interested in it, even if sardonically. The power of a good story was easy enough for them to understand, so cinema therapy made some sense. At the same time, weren't these stories thoroughly compromised by the time they arrived in movie theaters, formulated to appeal to the biggest possible audience? How authentic could a person's experience with a Hollywood film truly be?

I told Wolz I needed a film just for me and my ignorant, denying self. If we were going to do this, we'd need to keep going.

"*Don Juan DeMarco*," she said without hesitating.

"Never heard of it."

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***Don Juan DeMarco***
**Or: Why the mask, Johnny Depp?**

In the first few minutes of *Don Juan DeMarco*, Johnny Depp announces to the audience in a Castilian accent, "I am the greatest lover the world has ever known."

I was watching the DVD on a laptop in my bed with J., a woman I'd recently begun dating. I snapped both sets of fingers, raised my eyebrows toward her, and said, "Does my therapist know me or what?"

A few minutes later, Depp's character gets talked out of taking a leap off a billboard by *his* therapist-to-be, played by Marlon Brando, and then is committed to a psychiatric ward for evaluation.

This time I really found myself trying to get a step ahead of Wolz. In the film, Depp's delusional Don Juan challenges Brando's definition of "reality" at every turn. Brando, who has fallen out of love with his wife and lost his zest for life in general, grows intrigued by the magical Don Juan and his insatiable appetite for women. Through Don Juan's lusty tales -- whether they're fact or fiction is left to the viewer to decide -- Brando's character recharges his midlife batteries. Brando, like the viewer, is left to say, *The hell with reality!* Love is all that matters!

"Maybe not all people are crazy who look crazy," I told Wolz as we took our seats in her office the following week. "They've got something to teach us, too. And love is infectious. That's what I got out of it."

But I had my most powerful scene all mapped out. The scene that spoke to me, I told her, was the one where Brando finally asks Don Juan why he wears his mask, which I saw a two-cent metaphor for "Why are you hiding?" But Depp turns it around on his therapist and tells Brando with conviction, "Yes, but I see right through all of *your* masks." Brando, the "sane" guy, was actually the one hiding from life.

Using Wolz' guidelines to conscious movie-watching, I knew I then had to ask myself, "What do masks mean to me, and when do I wear them?"

"What's the answer you came up with?" asked Wolz, who seemed pleased with her client's preparedness. "And think it over. When in your life have you used masks?"

Oh, I said, a few years ago you could probably have described my personality as a little more crass, perhaps more vulgar, a little harsher around the edges. I told her I

used a lot of biting sarcasm for wit, and I didn't mind making fun of people to their faces.

"So why did you carry the masks?" she asked.

"I didn't want anyone to know me," I said, picking the obvious answer. "I didn't want anyone to know me for who I am. Because, ah, I didn't think anyone would love me for what I am or for who I was. Or understand me, or accept me." Yadda yadda yadda. "So shedding that mask," I summed up, "I realized I'll still be acceptable if I'm not that way."

"Fear? Fear that you wouldn't be liked?"

Sure, fear.

"Is there a certain environment where you still wear your masks? Work? Relationships?"

Sure, work, relationships, cocktail parties, wherever. Now that she mentioned it, I'd recently had this talk with J. where we both pretty much admitted we'd been holding back, not giving it our all because, you know, what if it doesn't work out? So we agreed we were a slow burn, no rush. You could say we were wearing masks. Or at least I was.

"Do you think it's possible that in this movie the scene came out for you because of right now, the situation of your relationship?"

"Inside, yes," I said. "But intellectually, I would have seen it anyway." I mean, we're talking about *masks*, I said. Only snow is a more common metaphor in films.

"But this metaphor really spoke to you," Wolz pressed. She pointed out that my first answer was, "Inside, yes," which she took as my intuition -- the "first hit" as she called it. "That's what we're looking for: the initial strike, the gut feeling."

I got where she was coming from, but even if I were transparent as a glass of water, I'd still have seen the masks theme in *Don Juan*. "It was kinda hard to miss," I protested. "Up until the end of the movie, he wore a

mask."

"We discuss this film in group," Wolz countered, referring to her weekly meetings of about six people, "and this aspect did not come up for anybody."

"You're kidding."

"No," Wolz said with a little laugh. "It's really yours. And maybe a hundred other people."

What speaks to you in movies, Wolz went on, is the breaking news in your life. That's why favorite movies, seen again years later, elicit new meanings and new feelings, leaving the viewer to proclaim, "It gets better each time I watch it," or "I don't know why I ever liked that movie."

I could see it coming a mile away. Wolz was about to home in on shedding my masks.

"Do you desire to have more or fewer masks in your life?" she asked.

"As a rule of thumb, I'd like to have fewer." Still, I told her, the mask level feels okay right now, especially given the new relationship. I don't know J. very well. "There's prudence in not exposing everything at once," I said, "for the same reasons that time doesn't happen all at once."

Wolz nodded, but I'm not sure even I believed it. There's a strange climate inside a therapist's office that makes a few words of BS foul the entire room.

So I babbled on about how much I liked that Don Juan wore no internal masks. Even though he had a cloth mask on the outside, I said, he actually knew himself better on the inside than Brando's clinically sane character did. "There was a clarity he had of his own story, a conviction, an understanding of himself that could only be admired," I said.

"Is that a contradiction," Wolz asked, "that you admired Don Juan for having no masks, yet in your own life you justify them?"

"Sure, I guess," I said.

"I don't want to talk you into it," she said, adjusting in her chair.

"Yeah, no, you're not. There's prudence in preserving a certain amount of mask when you're engaging in a new relationship."

Wolz nodded. "It's a contradiction."

"Yes, it is."

Wolz wondered where the danger was in removing all my masks for J. She asked me to close my eyes, relax, and call up my Inner Adviser. "Remember," she said, "the Inner Adviser is the highest aspect of who you are."

The therapist had me make two columns on my notepad. One said "Street Self," the way I deal with things daily, and the other said "Higher Self," the way I'd do things if I were Christlike in my generosity of heart.

She asked me questions about the new relationship. About thirty seconds later I realized Street Self was conflicted and Brandoesque, while Higher Self was unchallenged and like Don Juan.

When we finished she asked, "How do you feel?"

"Sad. I feel sad because giving love, in the Higher Self column, was real, but seemed so difficult to do in real life. Being totally open and unguarded, I guess, is still a big step for me."

Wolz credited the scene I'd picked out, and again asked me to call it up when I needed it. "You'll be much more aware of your mask then you were before," she said, "and you'll be a compassionate observer."

I asked her why she had prescribed *Don Juan*. "The reason was the question about reality, what's real and not real," she said. "When we talked last week we talked about different dimensions of reality -- the Inner Critic, shifting the perspective of the minds -- and this movie asks a good question: What's real? What's your deepest truth? What's your deepest reality as opposed to your superficial reality? The movie can help you question

reality."

Wolz directed me to my notepad. I was buying into my Street Self, she pointed out, even though I knew a Higher Self existed. If I wanted to, I could live life in the Higher Self which, she concluded, "is equally real or maybe more real."

This was all very uplifting; the notion that a bit of divine goodness lives in all of us. But I had to point out that Depp's character walked through life waving a sword and speaking in a Castilian accent when he was actually born in Phoenix. By any real-world standard, he was delusional, suicidal, possibly even homicidal. Perhaps this is why we should refrain from gleaning too much from movies for our real life, I said. After all, these people can exist only in a make-believe world.

"There is a schizophrenic character, that's true," Wolz admitted with a grin. "Remember, it's a fairy tale."

Somewhere, a screenwriter was getting a big chuckle out of our conversation.

Later that day, Wolz sent an e-mail asking me to consider all the movies I've seen, and which touched me the most. *Old Yeller*? *Ordinary People*? *ET*? I went back deep but couldn't come up with anything, so I asked around the office. And then someone reminded me about *The Elephant Man*.

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***The Elephant Man***
**Or: Who's a freak now?**

Curious about Wolz' other clients, I wrote them letters, which she passed along. All of the past and present clients I spoke with agreed that the technique was the easiest and most accessible way into their psyches. One woman, a 31-year-old UC Berkeley employee, told me she'd always wondered why specific scenes from certain films stuck with her over the years. For her, *Edward Scissorhands* was a nightmare on celluloid, instantly conjuring up unresolved feelings of being an outsider. "Talking about them in the group gave me the forum for discussing why they stay with me," she said. "It's so interesting to look at a movie

-- something that's unrelated to my life -- and then come up with new ways to look at my life."

I agreed, but also wondered if Wolz and I weren't making connections that didn't necessarily exist. For instance, when I described the Japanese ambassador as ignorant, why did that reveal my repressed fear of ignorance? Why couldn't it just be an observation of character the screenwriter had intended? Had I been led by Wolz' hand, under vulnerable circumstances, to draw conclusions about myself that weren't entirely true? This was, after all, only a movie.

When I talked to Dr. Goldenberg at UCLA, she worried that cinema therapists, tainted by their own projections, are vulnerable to misdiagnosis. "Just because you have a reaction to something on the screen doesn't mean you've been repressing something," she said, adding that the environment and physical act of watching movies are so varied, they can influence your interpretation of the film. "As a culture, we share the same pop references but we experience them so differently," she said. "You may be watching the movie as a rerun, just catching up to what everyone has been talking about. I may watch it in a crowded movie theater, and you may watch it at home on video, on the couch. All these things have to be taken into account."

Wolz' relationship with films was shaped as a young girl attending the cinema with her grandfather. After she immigrated to the United States, she got a Ph.D in economics and earned her counseling license. A movie buff herself, Wolz began using films in her practice ten years ago. The results, she says, "have been amazing," even if she's aware of the critics who castigate cinema therapy as a treatment du jour.

"I came to this position after careful study," Wolz writes in her manuscript in defense of cinema therapy. "My support for it is checked by awareness of how, historically, new therapeutic tools are often hyped, then become 'all the rage' only to fade with the approach of the next 'great new therapy.' Observing such trends can easily make one cynical about new therapeutic techniques in general. But when it comes to the transformative impact of certain

movies, I see great potential."

I was still curious about this "transformative impact." Until she asked me to consider it, I'd long forgotten my first encounter with *The Elephant Man*. One afternoon in 1983, shortly after my dad died, I went to the movie theater with my mom for a matinee. I can remember wearing my cleats and uniform, so it was after baseball practice. Otherwise, all I recall is discomfort at the sight of the grainy black-and-white film on the screen, and then being inconsolable. In a fit of tears, before the movie ended, I asked my mom if we could leave. I never did learn how it ended.

The movie is based on the true story of John Merrick, who suffered from neurofibromatosis, a rare disease that causes hideous deformities of the face and body. First shuffled around as a circus freak, he is later taken in by Dr. Frederick Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins), who studies him for medical purposes, but prods his newfound client not so differently than the circus barkers.

In the two decades between *The Elephant Man* and *Mystic River*, I hadn't shed a tear in a movie theater, a fact Wolz found interesting. Each time I visited a video store and came across the box for *The Elephant Man*, I shivered. The name David Lynch in general gave me the heebees. Now here I was, trying to get a grip on exactly why the film had creeped me out for twenty years.

"So," Wolz asked, "what was your response this time around?"

"It was nothing," I said. "I mean, it was hard to see what I was so afraid of."

"So you had a different response?

Uh, yeah. "I got melancholy about how he was beaten and lashed. When Anthony Hopkins finds him in a dungeon, I was with Hopkins. He shed a tear. It was messed up."

There were two scenes that captivated me. One was minor: After Merrick is put on the back of a wagon for show, and then falls to the ground, his captor jabs him in the ribs with a stick. "It was convincing," I told her. "I

heard myself say 'Ouch. '"

Then there was the subway scene -- probably the movie's most famous -- in which John is chased and cornered by a mob, then holds them off with the line, "I am not an animal." I told Wolz that this was where I recalled losing it as a kid. I hadn't lost it this time, but God, I suddenly remembered it well.

"When you allow yourself to go back into that scene for a moment, what's coming up for you?" Wolz asked.

"I feel sad for him because the people were about to -- you know, it was a big misunderstanding. He wasn't an animal. He was a human being. And in their cruelness, it was just terrifying. I got really afraid of that, when the mob was about to descend on him."

"Did this remind you of anything in your own life?" she asked.

Wolz was curious what was up the first time I saw *The Elephant Man*. As a kid, was I accepted? A loner? Before my dad's death, I was fine, I told her. Afterward, I felt that neighborhood stigma: The boy whose dad died.

I predicted where she'd go with this and pounced first: "I didn't identify with the aspect of the loner, or the freak in the movie," I qualified. "I didn't identify with it at all. I just understood."

"You were the opposite in your real life?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Wolz rested her chin on her hand. "We talked about the shadow."

Yeah.

"You must have done everything possible to become popular, to *not* be like him? For some reason, you had a very strong reaction to this movie. So my sense is, for some reason, this was something especially important to you. Some people become computer experts, some people become ... whatever. You wanted to be popular.

"It was something that was important to you, and the shadow self is kind of the Elephant Man, you know what I mean? That is not what you really would want to have in your life -- the Freak.

"And I bet this whole theme has something to do with your life today to some degree," she went on. "It's just that the origins are very early, and that's why this movie is very interesting for you."

I was stunned. No one had ever told me I wanted desperately to be popular. And yet I couldn't deny it. Wolz suggested some gestalt work: I was to move around the room, taking on the traits of the different characters. She drew the shades, then arranged three chairs. One was for my Higher Self.

"Where do you think the Elephant Man, John, might sit?" she asked.

"Over there," I said.

"Why don't you sit over there?"

Under Wolz' direction, I relaxed and closed my eyes. "Now tune into the character of John, his life, his experiences," she said in her soft voice.

I paused, then mumbled: "I just keep thinking about the word 'sad.' I don't know if his character actually is."

"If you see your life in the movie, what scene do you see yourself in and what scene is charged?"

"When he gets poked with the stick."

"How does it feel?"

"Ouch!"

"Okay, how about emotionally?"

"Twice as much."

"Twice as much, okay. ... Open your eyes for a moment. Is there anything you can remember of your early life? Is there anything that reminds you of this early experience?"

I had to consider.

"Close your eyes and think back if you have to."

I closed my eyes again, then spoke. "The closest it came, it was years later. I remember my mother was very angry, fighting with one of my sisters, and she swung a broomstick, and it got me. Right in the side. Kind of the elbow, and the side."

"How did it feel?"

"Terrible. Just terrible sadness. Painful. Sharp."

"Okay, okay," Wolz said softly. "Open your eyes. Now, what other character was important to you?"

"The doctor."

"Which chair would the doctor sit in? And go sit there."

I sat across from the Elephant Man. Immediately I felt relieved.

"Now tune into that character," Wolz said. "What's his name?

"Treves."

"How does he feel?

"Compassionate. Curious."

"So now look at John sitting over there, who is suffering so much. What are you feeling toward him?

"Sadness and a sense of compassion."

"Okay."

"Like, I know I can give compassion here, but I can't cure you. ... There's a scene when he asks if the doctor can cure him, and the doctor says without missing a beat, 'No.' That it's not his job to cure him, only help him. And there's a sadness to that honesty. But it's honest. And finally, it's someone who cares."

"So now imagine a response from John. What would he

say?"

"'Thank you!'"

"Okay!"

"Intellectually, though, there's nothing the doctor can do. It sucks. It's frustrating."

"Now think of another character."

I didn't know his name, so I called him "Little Guy." Late in the movie John is tossed into an animal cage next to a wild monkey. Little Guy, who was a midget or a dwarf, frees him. He just looks at the Elephant Man and says, "We're going to get you out of here," and that was that. It was just an instinctual response to help someone. It was sweet.

"Okay," Wolz said. "Go sit in Little Guy's seat."

I sat on the couch, feeling playful.

"Now," Wolz asked, "what would he say to the Elephant Man?"

"I'm not sure he would say anything. He would just *do*. React."

"Who do you want more of in you? Little Guy? Or the doctor?

"The Little Guy, sure. He just responds, he doesn't think. It's more natural. He just *is*."

"Okay, okay."

I moved back to my chair, confused. So I wanted to be a better person. Who doesn't? "Is it possible," Wolz asked, "that the thing you like about yourself the least has to do with how others perceive you in a certain way?"

"Yes. I struggle with that a lot."

Wolz asked me to put it in a context, and for the next ten minutes I blabbered on about how I'm a fraud, how I sometimes wait for the tap on the shoulder that says

Move Away from the Computer. Go Home. Take a Teaching Job.

Wolz asked me to focus on the Little Guy in me, and deliver a dose of compassion to the part of me that felt fraudulent. Little Guy could help, she said.

She then had me play musical chairs again, and asked each character to assess me. Remarkably, they were considerate. Dr. Treves felt I was fine, intellectually. The Elephant Man said I didn't have it so bad, so quit whimpering. And Little Guy was pulling for me.

Still, underneath I was seething. I felt totally exposed, and stupid that I'd have to share this story, but I was also secretly looking forward to it. I was clearly confused, and this made me insecure, and wishing I'd never engaged in this experiment. When did I ever think this was a good idea? Just how drunk was I? Wasn't there a city planning commission somewhere that needed coverage instead? I shared all of this with Wolz.

"Something more is happening," Wolz commented. "This is a step forward." She encouraged me to connect with Little Guy right then. But I wasn't convinced he could help. He was temporary. Twenty minutes after I left Wolz' office, I told her, the connection would be lost, forgotten. And Little Guy would be a silly concept, ripe for even my own ridicule.

"I'd suggest for you to hold that as a belief and not a truth," she said. "Because I'm convinced the Little Guy is going to be your long-term solution. The doctor said he can care for you, but he can't transform. The Little Guy is the compassion from the heart.

"Elephant Man didn't need to be transformed physically. He would feel good in the world because he would be loved for who he is," she went on. "So I would encourage you to connect with Little Guy's perspective. If you don't feel accepted by the world, can you connect with compassion toward yourself? Can you connect with Little Guy for that moment? I know it isn't easy, but you may want to try."

I was feeling fatigued for both of us. How many people

had come before her to say they didn't feel the world truly accepted them? I felt like a big fat cliché. I wanted off this ride, and out of the office. The session finally ended, and I left feeling worse than when I'd arrived.

As I walked to my car, my chest cavity felt hollow, as if I'd been up all night gambling away more than I could afford. It was the bottomless feeling of self-loathing, the kind that doesn't get played for laughs, à la Seinfeld, or Woody Allen, but God, I could use something now. I looked up Piedmont Avenue and wouldn't have minded at all if the next bus that drove by jumped the curb and flattened me cold.

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***Good Will Hunting***
**Or: What are you afraid of?**

But life teaches us these feelings are temporary. And thanks to massive budget cutbacks at AC Transit, the 59 doesn't run too frequently along Piedmont.

The next few days I felt like shit, obsessed with my insecurities. By midweek, though, the self-pity was too heavy to carry around. Something lifted, and I felt relieved. When I next walked into Wolz' office, I felt like a kid ready to ace a test. It would be an easy session no matter what she threw my way. I'd connected with my demons, I was proud to report, and somehow felt a new sense of security. In the shrink world, I'd achieved a breakthrough. I was so excited I had to resist telling friends how insecure I truly was.

For our final session, Wolz had picked *Good Will Hunting*, in which Robin Williams plays a therapist who breaks down Matt Damon's cocksure character and persuades him to live life, not fear it. Wolz told me later she picked the film for me because Damon's character Will Hunting "epitomizes insecurity, and tries to compensate for it by being cocky." Her remark stung, but I was determined to be cool with it.

I was anxious to tell her how easily I got lost in the film during Williams' first monologue. He tells his young client that life is more than the books we read, films we see, or facts we learn. It's the people we love, the risks we take,

the intimacy we sow. And Will Hunting, as Williams' character pointed out, had yet to put himself on the line, to expose himself to life or love. I *got* that, I told Wolz.

"You *lived* the movie after that," she said with some enthusiasm. "[Williams] invited you in!"

"Yes!" I said. "I sided with his take on life, big-time."

She recalled my previous insistence that masks were prudent when starting a new relationship, and noted that I'd just had a change in my thinking. "It wasn't so clear a few weeks ago, was it?" she said.

"Guess not," I mumbled. The first time I saw the movie I'd hardly noticed Robin Williams' character, Sean McGuire. Now I was fairly enthralled by him. And in his breakthrough with the reluctant Damon, when he spoke about the Sistine Chapel ceiling, I got into it: I'd been there, and felt the sense of awe he describes, I said. I even let go of my Inner Critic this time and didn't fret about my inability to paint.

Wolz set up chairs for some gestalt work. "Connect with every cell in your body to become Sean McGuire," she said. "Take on his perspective." I assumed the character's romantic sensibility, good or bad, and enjoyed it.

Then I sat in Will Hunting's chair. I had slouched shoulders, stubborn feelings, arrogance. So cocky, I was ignorant to my own ignorance. I felt numb. Small. Afraid.

"What's Justin Berton afraid of?" Wolz asked.

Huh?

"What is Justin Berton afraid of?"

It was hard to say out loud. "Of being found out, I suppose. That I don't actually believe I'm a good writer, a good person. That that's the truth. That I'm a fraud. Of how insecure it all is."

"The insecurity," she said. "It's denied, never acknowledged, so it gets buried."

"Oh, it comes out in bursts, believe me."

"Yes?"

"It'll have to. When I write this story."

"How does that feel?"

"Scary ... and liberating." Scary because no one wants to make an ass out of himself in print. Liberating because even if you do, does anybody really care?

"So you're willing to take the risk, like Will Hunting," Wolz said, connecting the dots. "In the end, we don't see it onscreen, but he takes the risk and drives off to California. You want to take the risk, too?"

Sure, I said.