

How Is Cinematherapy Possible? An Existential-Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

This study reconsiders the concept of cinematherapy, arguing that it should not be simplified as a clinical psychological technique. Instead, it is reframed as a philosophical and experiential form of film engagement rooted in existential phenomenology. Unlike conventional models that rely on therapist-led interpretation and standardized emotional responses, this research emphasizes how viewers generate meaning through personal, embodied encounters with film. By drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment and Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, the paper proposes a three-part experiential framework: image guidance, which initiates symbolic identification and imaginative immersion; bodily resonance, which evokes sensory awareness and affective responses; and narrative reflection, which enables the viewer to reconfigure their interpretive frame and deepen their self-understanding. The paper analyzes *Incantation* (2022), a contemporary Taiwanese horror film that combines mockumentary style, occult rituals, and the threat of invisible curses. Through subjective camerawork, chaotic bodily expressions, and interactive narrative elements, the film provokes a visceral response to themes of belief, guilt, and existential instability. Rather than offering symbolic resolution or therapeutic release, the horror aesthetic functions as a destabilizing space where viewers confront fractured subjectivity and existential anxiety. This study contributes to the theoretical expansion of cinematherapy by presenting it as a dynamic process of embodied meaning-making. It invites interdisciplinary dialogue across film theory, media philosophy, and affect studies, and repositions the viewer as an active participant in their own emotional and existential interpretation of cinema.

Keywords: cinematherapy, embodiment, image guidance, narrative reflection, existential phenomenology

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Introduction

Cinema has often been described as a man-made dream. Since the Lumière brothers released the widely regarded first film, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), “shock” has become the basic principle by which films are perceived (Benjamin, 1939, 2010). Shock refers to acquiring novel experience through dreams or films, achieving a purifying effect consistent with Aristotle’s view of catharsis via pity and fear (Wells, 2000).

Berg-Cross et al. (1990) formally introduced cinematherapy to academic discourse, outlining its history, theoretical foundations, clinical procedures, case studies, and film lists. They situated cinematherapy in relation to bibliotherapy, tracing it to earlier therapeutic uses of reading, including what they described as Sir Walter Galt’s nineteenth-century survey of hospital reading practices. They further observed that bibliotherapy had been associated with enhanced self-awareness, motivation for change, and emotional expression, often through the generation of new insights. These narrative values, they argued, extend to cinematherapy and confer several advantages: watching films is generally more accessible than assigned reading; cinema operates as a publicly shared cultural form; and films prompt reflection on inner conflict and personal values.

From a psychoanalytic view, Ingmar Bergman noted that no art resembles dreams as closely as cinema; films evoke unconscious emotions and can induce a trance-like state (Hu & Zhu, 2015). Kozubek (2016) likewise places cinematherapy in the lineage of bibliotherapy but centers projection/identification: patients “see themselves” on the screen, merging with characters’ circumstances, symbols, thoughts, and emotions. Kracauer (1997) invokes the Medusa myth: the screen’s image, like a mirror, lets us confront the petrifying unconscious; Perseus’s feat is to overcome fear and face the reflected monster.

Cinema and psychoanalysis emerged almost simultaneously. Film studies moved from semiotic psychoanalysis to phenomenology; cinematherapy theory, however, often remains at bibliotherapy/psychoanalysis. Although clinicians report positive cases and stages, a full-fledged theory is lacking (Kozubek, 2016). This study therefore asks: Can we build an interdisciplinary methodology by integrating film studies (communication) with cinematherapy (psychology)?

Early cases (Breuer’s Anna O.; Freud’s “Mrs. N”) reflect a Cartesian mind—an inner container separable from the world. Pathology is labeled, and free association or hypnosis aims to expel repressed causes. This yields two problems: stigmatizing isolation and a dangerous inner/outer split (Stolorow et al., 2002/2021). Gendlin (1966) instead grounds inquiry in relational existence: lived experience is a felt process that models and concepts should point to, not ossify.

Li (2016) notes that natural science presumes a world independent of the self; even post-positivism’s “ultimate reality” remains inaccessible, thus hypothesis-testing. Phenomenology treats factual existence as an “unknown mystery” and turns to ontological reflection on human existence. Natural science grasps the state of fact; phenomenology the state of existence. Phenomenological work is tested heuristically—by its power to disclose meaning in multidimensional phenomena.

For schizophrenia, the disclosure of meaning is blocked, experience collapses inward as primordial images/voices, severing life-world ties (Gendlin, 1966). Relational therapy advocates emotional dwelling—entering the other’s broken world so that fragments flash with

shared understanding and care, allowing trauma to be borne and transformed (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019/2023). Phenomenology, with intentionality (noesis/noema), opens existence outward; concepts serve as pointers to felt experience (Gendlin, 1966).

Technological change (streaming, mobile media, gaming, VR) has pushed cinema toward immersive, interactive experience; marketing extends emotion from screen to environment, blurring film/reality and building intertextual networks (Wu, 2024). Text-centered psychoanalysis and semiotics no longer suffice. Today film studies attend to the pre-reflective convergence of sensation and materiality (MacDougall, 2005); phenomenology's maxim—experience is meaning—suggests a bridge between film studies and cinematherapy.

Cinematherapy inherits self-help practices from bibliotherapy. Although cinematherapy entered psychotherapy with Berg-Cross et al., much popular work centers on self-help manuals (*poradników do autoterapii*) (Kozubek, 2016), reflecting resistance to medicalization; cinematherapy avoids pharmacological risks and is efficient.

At psychoanalysis's outset, Freud and Jung analyzed themselves and required therapists to undergo analysis (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019/2023). Foucault's technologies of the self identify practices—such as confession—through which individuals transform themselves under the imperative to “know thyself” (Wang, 2015). Contemporary engagement includes trailers, exhibits, merchandise, cross-platform releases, Q&As, reviews, rewatches, and fan communities. Traditional cinematherapy positioned film as auxiliary to therapist dialogue (Tylikowska, 2015; Tylikowska & Tucholska, 2017). Thus a second research question arises: As film studies pivots to affective experience and psychotherapy to emotional resonance, can cinema itself replace the therapist—enabling viewers to adopt a therapeutic attitude autonomously?

This study's aims: (1) build a methodology of cinematherapy by integrating communication and psychology; (2) bring phenomenological analysis and existential psychotherapy into cinematherapy to explore broader viewing and the possibility of self-directed cinematherapy.

Literature Review

Myth, the Sacred, and the Cinematic Sanctuary

Cinema can function as a modern locus of the sacred. Following Kawai (2016/2018), awe before the sun is not worship of an external object but veneration of an inner, numinous experience—what myth renders into narrative. Entering a theater resembles stepping into a temple or clinic: a threshold to altered consciousness. Bazin (1967) casts cinema as a modern myth whose sound, light, color, and immediacy install a sense of real presence. When the house lights dim, spectators are inducted into this ritual space and its trance-like receptivity.

Cinema, the Unconscious, and the Mirror

Benjamin (1936/1999) argues that the optical unconscious names what slow motion, magnification, and special effects disclose beyond ordinary perception. Metz (1977/2006) replies that film is not a literal mirror—our bodies are absent—yet it organizes a world we can inhabit imaginatively. Meunier (1969) warns against reducing the spectator to a hypnotized regressive; the viewing subject remains active and discerning. Together these positions recast

cinema as a crafted passage between consciousness and unconscious life, not a one-way slide into infantile trance.

Immersion and Identification: From Falling-Out to Entering

For Metz (1977/2006), cinematic practice becomes effective only through a passion of perception. Kozubek (2016) makes this the clinical starting point: identification with a role and the feelings it evokes sustains the therapeutic process. Filmmakers minimize cues that trigger “falling out” (awareness of the apparatus) and cultivate “entering” (affective identification), so that viewers move with the film rather than standing over it.

Aura, the Three Looks, and Affective Engineering

Benjamin (1936/1998, 1936/1999, 1955/2012) describes aura as the felt reciprocity whereby the object seems to “look back.” Over-rapid cutting can dissipate this reciprocity. Spectators know films are fictions yet oscillate between investment and distance (Metz, 1977/2006). Screenwriting techniques scaffold this oscillation: empathy and credibility (McKee, 1997/2014) bring us near; Mulvey’s (1989) “three looks” reminds us fiction suppresses camera-awareness to keep us from sliding too far away.

Catharsis and Therapeutic Layers

Read against Aristotle, catharsis is a disciplined emotional discharge; projection/identification remains a pathway to deeper release (Kozubek, 2016). Kuriansky et al. (2010) synthesize practice into layers: films that open emotion (cathartic), release repression (popcorn), and—most centrally—prompt self-understanding through the character’s journey (evocative). These layers will later map onto this study’s triadic model.

Myth, Symbol, and a Psychopathology of the Text

Myths convert fear and desire into shareable plots, easing complexes and feeding meaning (Kozubek, 2016). When ritual channels fail, images erupt in dreams or highly stylized narratives (Campbell, 2008/2020). Within this frame, screen images become a “presence of absence” (Metz, 1977/2006). Bleuler’s naming of schizophrenia highlighted subjective images as symptomatic; phenomenological clinicians re-read such images as reparative efforts situated in life histories and relationships (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019/2023).

Level One—Evoking Emotion Beyond a Cartesian Transfer

The traditional projection model pictures a mental content transferred one-way into another psyche—a last bastion of Cartesianism. Infant research and intersubjective psychoanalysis instead show human beings natively participate in nonverbal affect (Stolorow et al., 2002/2021). Li (2006) conceptualizes experience as the construction of coupling relations: viewers interact with filmic worlds and characters directly, yielding affective synchronization rather than mere projection.

Level Two—Discharging Repression as Response and Suture

Within an intersubjective frame, symptoms are not simply drive-based repressions but experiences that received no adequate response. Film viewing then functions as a field for new

responses that draw what was concealed to the center (Stolorow et al., 2002/2021). Oudart’s (1997) suture clarifies how shot/reverse-shot alternation patches the gap between imaginary immersion and symbolic awareness: identification shifts across positions, maintaining continuity without ejecting the viewer.

Level Three—Understanding the Self: Personal Myths, Collective Patterns

Kozubek (2016) urges a turn from generic psychological models to humanities-based attention to singularity and meaning. May (1991) adds that personal myths are variants of collective patterns. Thus the viewer’s self-understanding need not contradict broader cultural archetypes; it refashions them.

Metaphor, Lived Interaction, and Phenomenological Reorientation

Cinematherapy works by mobilizing metaphors that move feelings into language and action (Heston & Kottman, 1997). Interactional life is easily objectified as “content” (Jiang, 2001). A phenomenological attitude restores priority to lived process: rather than dissecting film as text alone, we examine what experiences unfold in viewing and how they revise our stance toward the world. This reorientation anchors the methodological bridge to be articulated in §3.

Methodology: An Existential-Phenomenological Approach

Methodologically, I therefore analyze viewing through the three-stage frame outlined above.

Dreaming a Hero

Cinema as prescription: by material, fiction vs documentary; by form, classic (art) vs genre. Clinicians select commercial genre films (Berg-Cross et al., 1990). Art films prize aesthetic autonomy/defamiliarization (Braudy, 2002); genre films help audiences understand self and society. Liu (2012) contrasts them (Table 1).

Table 1
A Comparison of Genre Films and Classic (Art) Films

Aspect	Classic (Art) Films	Genre Films
Effect	Stir emotions	Promote understanding
Feature	Tell a complete story	Depict human nature; visual style
Problem	Solve a single core problem	Explore multiple problems of life
Method	Follow production norms	Rely on intuition and inspiration
Stance	Use old forms for new issues	Reject old forms; pursue new forms

Note. Adapted from Liu, 2012; compiled in this study.

Genre storytelling centers a **controlling idea** that tracks how/why a character transforms (McKee, 1997/2014). To prime empathy, Snyder (2014) advises “**save the cat.**” Mythic archetypes undergird the **hero’s journey** widely adapted across genres (Campbell, 2008/2020, 2020) (Table 2).

Table 2*Narrative Structure of the Hero's Journey*

1. Call to Adventure	2. Refusal of the Call	3. Supernatural Aid	4. Crossing First Threshold	5. Belly of the Whale	6. Road of Trials
7. Meeting with the Goddess	8. Woman as Temptress	9. Atonement with the Father	10. Apotheosis	11. The Ultimate Boon	12. Refusal of the Return
13. Magic Flight	14. Rescue from Without	15. Crossing Return Threshold	16. Master of Two Worlds	17. Freedom to Live	

Note. Adapted from Campbell, 2020; compiled in this study.

Li (2022), drawing on Ericksonian hypnosis as articulated in earlier clinical literature, describes the co-writing of a hypnotic script with a client, through which semantic, bodily, and imagistic awareness emerges. Analogously, this study analyzes three facets: image guidance, evoking bodily sensation, narrative reflection.

Image Guidance

Imagistic awareness is central to healing, but phenomenology reads images through acts of seeing rather than projection (Li, 2022). Jung's (1960/2014) active imagination aims at a transcendent function; von Franz (2001/2011) details steps (empty self-consciousness; let images arise; question them; integrate in life). Cinematherapy values films that evoke imagination and feeling (Kozubek, 2016). Recurring motifs intensify metaphoric interaction.

Evoking Bodily Sensation

Viewing in clinical contexts externalizes problems and reduces resistance (Dermer & Hutchings, 2000). Cinematherapy affords stress release, enhanced well-being, and insight (Kozubek, 2016). Film and viewer form a visuotactile unity (Barker, 2009); vision is haptic (Marks, 2000). Focusing operationalizes felt sense in six steps (Gendlin, 2012), enabling stuck emotions to flow again. Film parallels focusing's rise-and-fall of affect but accelerates conflicts toward post-viewing release. Metaphoric discussion afterward is indispensable (Berg-Cross et al., 1990; Gregerson, 2010; Li, 2022).

Narrative Reflection

Stories structure life (White, 1993). Cinematherapy extends bibliotherapy by using film metaphorically to foster exploration and change (Berg-Cross et al., 1990). A triadic relation (client–therapist–film) creates a common vocabulary (Sacilotto et al., 2022); clients adopt a third-person stance (Sharp et al., 2002). Montage imposes new meanings (Bazin, 2009), yet meanings are ultimately conferred by viewers (Kozubek, 2016). Narrative therapy reframes unstoried events (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The Structure of Cinematherapy

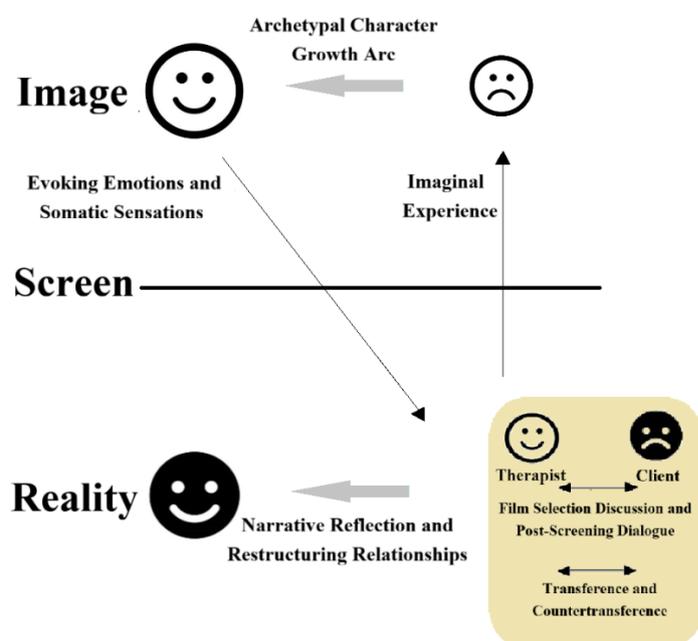
Cinematherapy typically involves a therapist-selected commercial film. Emotions arise unbidden even when fictionality is known—a natural result of understanding the character's situation (Kozubek, 2016). Strong films portray character arcs—growth or inner

transformation—with believable motives (McKee, 1997/2014). Misuse can backfire (defensiveness, misreading, over-interpretation). Cinematherapy is intentional (Tylikowska, 2016): viewers remain simultaneously inside and outside the story, half-awake/half-dreaming with therapeutic purpose.

Alliance-Based Cinematherapy

Existential-phenomenological therapy emphasizes intersubjectivity and affect (Stolorow et al., 2002/2021). Experiential therapy entails encounter, including the clinician’s vulnerability (Gendlin, 1966). Trauma stems from malattunement; a relational home buffers anxiety (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019/2023). Watching the same film supplies a shared “magnifying glass” of reality (Sacilotto et al., 2022). Film is supportive—not standalone—thus dialogue remains essential (Kozubek, 2016).

Figure 1
Alliance-Based Cinematherapy Structure

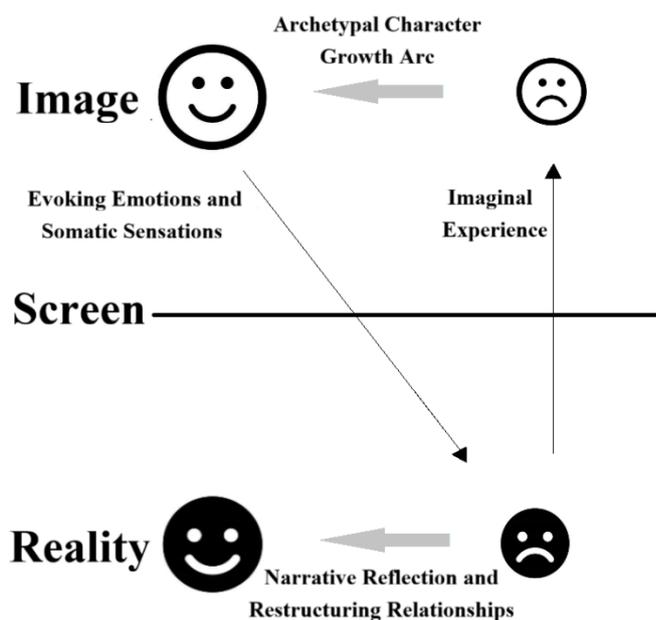


Source: This study.

Autonomous Cinematherapy

Self-directed practice is historically grounded in Foucault’s notion of technologies of the self (Wang, 2015). Drawing on earlier discussions by Raczek (2014) and Wolz (2005), Tylikowska and Tucholska (2017) identify several risks associated with the autotherapeutic use of film, including difficulty distinguishing fiction from reality, mismatches between preferences and comprehension, missing narrative essentials, weak linkage to lived experience, lack of support, and emotional overload. Popular self-cure guides often lack a definition of “health” and evidence (Gregerson, 2010).

Figure 2
Autonomous Cinematherapy Structure



Source: This study.

Experience defines concepts, not vice versa (Gendlin, 1966). The film–viewer relation is a stimulus–response arc, modulated by broader texts (Kozubek, 2016). Meanings continue to unfold and be reinterpreted after the credits. Suitability—alliance or autonomy—returns to the initial condition: immersion (affective resonance). If a film elicits genuine emotion, the viewer recognizes its reality and adopts a direct stance toward the world (Kozubek, 2016).

Case Study: *Incantation* (2022)

Applying the three-stage frame to *Incantation* (Ko, 2022) makes visible how horror becomes a vehicle for existential work. The film employs a mock-documentary mode intertwined with folk religion, cult ritual, and curse transmission. Subjective shots, fragmentation, and interactive cues draw spectators into the text; its open ending extends horror into everyday life, supporting the premise that horror functions as a phenomenology of existential anxiety rather than mere emotional consumption.

A Three-Layer Process of Horror Viewing

Image Guidance: Generating Fear Through Absence

“Do you believe in blessings?”—the opening voiceover leads into an interactive Ferris-wheel/train demo that confuses whether intention steers the image or the image steers perception. Constrained vision, dropped/unpowered cameras, and omitted moments bind viewers to incomplete images. Duo-duo sees a “bad thing” and asks her mother to lead it away (Ruo-nan guides empty air); after the refrain “And then?”, Duo-duo jumps. Absence forces spectators to complete terror for themselves.

Evoking Bodily Sensation: Embodied Horror

Extreme bodily displays—ulcerated skin, tooth loss/growth, swallowing red-hot glass, head-banging, suicide—provoke mimetic reactions. The closing close-up of the Black Madonna (a faceless, hollowed head packed with granules) compels viewers to endure somatic shock between refusal and fixation; flashing curse wheels and harsh noise leave sensory residues that carry beyond the screen.

Narrative Reflection: Extending the Curse into Everyday Life

To save Duo-duo, Ruo-nan shares the curse with viewers, unveiling the Black Madonna to the camera. Whether Duo-duo survives remains blank. The opening question and final gaze implicate spectators as accomplices. Streaming popularity and merchandise extend efficacy into daily life, prompting the post-screening question: *Am I now in the chain of the curse?*

Horror as an Opportunity for Existential Healing

At image guidance, absence surfaces unconscious anxiety; at bodily sensation, somatic shock becomes existential tremor; at narrative reflection, open-ended extension sustains meaning-making. Thus *Incantation* exemplifies how contemporary horror can practice cinematherapy, guiding viewers to reinterpret existence and begin self-reconstruction.

Conclusion

Post-screening life is not a coda to cinema but the field where cinematic experience completes its work. Drawing on Kitaoka's (1998/2001) interpretation of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, markets, concerts, and cinemas can be understood as spaces of co-presence where a sense of self is mirrored in resonance with others—an encounter-relation rather than mere projection.

For Gendlin (1966), existence is felt, stuff of the body; for Heidegger, openness to being affected; for Sartre, a field of possibilities—unfolding after the film.

Living Out New Roles

Story structure mirrors client–environment relations; symbols mirror affective ties. Pathologizing resonant images as “symptom projection” negates efforts to re-link meaning and world; the conscious/unconscious boundary is an affective focal length (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019/2023). What matters is to feel and then reflect on one's situation (Kozubek, 2016). Live the role off-screen so the story's meaning speaks (McKee, 1997, 2014). Beyond self-narration, new stories must be realized outside the clinic (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Myths' value is their openness (May, 1991); film theory is likewise ongoing re-interpretation (Konigsberg, 2007).

Reviews and Rewatches

The same film yields diverse reviews; the same reviewer finds new meanings on rewatch. Reading stories mobilizes the whole person; what matters is one's own interpretation for life reflection (Kawai, 2016/2018). The self is an absent–present, a dynamic process where insight is pivotal (Gendlin, 1966). The therapist's task is not to change beliefs but to permit clients to

use their own thought and feeling in ways fitting their life's structure (Erickson, 1965). Empathy and emotional dwelling link spectators to characters and to one another (Konigsberg, 2007; Stolorow & Atwood, 2019, 2023), situating a group-therapy-like context.

Fan Therapy Sessions

Different archetypes draw different attachments. Ideal screenplays let characters mutually disclose facets, forming a constellation (McKee, 1997/2014). Living out meaning radiates resonance to other characters and their admirers; films can surface unspeakable family issues (Berg-Cross et al., 1990). Entering stories with therapeutic attitude via imaginative variation forms an imagined community of co-subjects, akin to existential-phenomenological family-constellation work. Compared with bibliotherapy, film adds a public layer; drawing on earlier discussions by Eisenberg (1986), Harry (1983), and Adams and McGuire (1986), Berg-Cross et al. (1990) argue that films can shift a region's social consciousness. Being seen, felt, and connected restores orientation (Gendlin, 1966) and yields a new moment beyond the known (Moustakas, 1966). Cinematherapy does not end with credits; the filmic situation reverberates and fuses with life (Gregerson, 2010).

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist in proofreading and formatting in accordance with APA 7th edition. The usage was limited to checking grammar, style, and citation consistency. No AI tools were used to generate original ideas, analysis, or discussion content.

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