

5 Movie Scenes That Offer a Master Class in Conversation

Level up your daily interactions with strategies from 'My Dinner With Andre' to 'Adaptation'



"My Dinner With Andre," Wallace Shawn, Andre Gregory, 1981. Photo: Everett Collection

Considering how inherent it is to everyday life, conversation is an under discussed art. But being more thoughtful about how we talk to each other can [yield powerful connections.](#)

I thought a lot about conversation when writing my memoir, [No One You Know](#), which revolves around my organic

interactions with strangers. Sometimes, those interactions were stimulating, sometimes a drag, and occasionally, they were revelatory. When I think about what makes a fruitful conversation, besides drawing on experience, it's been useful to consult a resource hiding in plain sight: movies. I've plumbed some of my favorites for enlightening clips and lessons and that are worth adding to the conversational tool belt. Here's what I've learned:

Offer perspective without shutting the other person down

"My Dinner With Andre" (1981)

This film centers entirely on a single conversation over dinner between two friends. Its naturalistic approach mimics the feel of everyday dialogue. Like a conversation you or I might have, there's the occasional lull and once in a while, it slows down, but patience is rewarded with powerful jolts of insight and recognition.

Where the lesson comes in: At one point, Wally mentions that he's become enamored with an electric blanket he's received as a gift. Andre is wary of the way technology distorts human experience and perception, but he doesn't put down Wally for using it, even as he compares an electric blanket to a lobotomy! Instead, he gently offers an alternative viewpoint. Disagreement is okay, even productive when handled with care. Good conversation

thrives on divergent perspectives, so long as you offer up your idea in a manner that adds to the dialogue rather than focusing on shutting the other person down.

"I wouldn't put on an electric blanket for anything," Andre says, kindly. "I think that kind of comfort separates you from reality in a very direct way. If you don't have that electric blanket and your apartment is cold and you need to put on another blanket and you need to go into the closet and pile up coats on top of the blanket you have, well, then you know it's cold. And that sets up a link of things. You have compassion — is the person next to you cold? Are there other people in the world who are cold? What a cold night! I like the cold, my god! I never realized. I don't want a blanket. It's fun being cold. I can snuggle up against you even more because it's cold. All sorts of things occur to you. Turn on that electric blanket and it's like taking a tranquilizer."

Inject a sense of play

"Before Sunrise" (1995)

"Before Sunrise" chronicles the unexpected connection of two strangers as they meander through Vienna together. Sometimes, they open themselves to each other and other times they retreat. It's a dance that happens through conversation, and over the course of a single day.

Where the lesson comes in: "It's Q&A time," Jesse says to Celine, before aping the voice of an old-timey

interviewer.

Conversations can reach a higher level of delight when the exchange has a playful heart.

“We’ve known each other a little while now. We’re stuck together so we’re gonna ask each other a few direct questions...And you have to answer 100% honestly.”

The idea of a Q&A could be rote and boring but when Jesse frames it like a game, it becomes something fun. The “100% honesty” rule is almost ironic, given that they barely know each other, so in that moment, he’s acknowledging the unlikelihood of it, while still daring Celine to be forthcoming. She’s up for the challenge.

Know when to get on (and off) the boatmobile of any conversation

“Waking Life” (2001)

This film is a series of wild conversations, dialogues, and soliloquies during one person’s lucid dream. Rich in oddball characters, it’s a mind-bender riddled with entertaining exchanges and soliloquies like the one in the clip.

Where the lesson comes in: “So what do you think of my little vessel?” the eccentric driver asks Wiley about his boatmobile. “She’s what I call seaworthy. S-e-e — see with your eyes. I feel like my transport should be an extension of

my personality. Voila!"

The driver doesn't really seem to be looking for an answer from Wiley, who he's just picked up as a hitchhiker. Mostly, it seems like he wants to share his sprawling philosophy of life. Sometimes, a conversation won't be what you expect, and maybe it won't be a perfect 50/50 split of time or even close to that, but that could be a nice change of pace, too. It can be rewarding to simply be immersed in someone else's worldview and language and particularity for a little while. There's no need to force a familiar structure on an interaction that wants to be something else. If you get tired of it, or it turns out that questions aren't welcome or there's no room for your own thoughts, then you can always leave or move on. Just pop off the boatmobile. But if you're enjoying the ride, see where it goes.

"This is like my little window to the world and every minute's a different show," the driver continues. "I may not understand it, I may not even necessarily agree with it, but I'll tell you what — I accept it and sort of glide along. You want to keep things on an even keel, I guess it what I'm saying. You want to go with the flow. The sea refuses no river. The idea is to remain in a state of constant departure while always arriving. Saves on introductions and goodbyes. The ride does not require an explanation. Just occupants."

Reflect on what conversations

you're ready to have

"In the Mood for Love" (2000)

Here we have an atmospheric romance between two neighbors who suspect their spouses are having an affair with each other. Much of the beauty of the film lies in what's unsaid, as the two characters navigate around their growing feelings for each other. Even when conversation doesn't touch on a personal or central topic, it can still bring people closer together.

Where the lesson comes in: "Tell me honestly. Do you have a mistress?" Mrs. Chan asks.

The tension is predictably high, but as the scene goes on, it's revealed that Mrs. Chan isn't talking to her husband — she's talking to her neighbor and friend, Mr. Chow, as a rehearsal for a tough conversation she's considering having. Mrs. Chan is still figuring out if she wants to (or is ready) to confront her husband.

If there's a fragile topic you're working up to talking about, one helpful approach is to practice with someone you're close with, like in the clip. But for many of us, there are some things that are simply private or we may not want to discuss, and that's okay! More than okay. It's not for the other person to decide (well, except maybe if you're like Mrs. Chan's husband and being confronted about an affair!). Especially with topics that can be charged or

sensitive for you, it's useful to give some thought to your readiness or even interest in talking about them. Knowing what may be out of bounds for you can let you more confidently navigate what otherwise could be a disconcerting moment if you're asked about something personal or near a sore spot. Just because someone asks you about something, that doesn't mean they're entitled to an answer.

Liberate yourself with a "lampshade"

"Adaptation" (2002)

Detailing Charlie Kaufman's struggle to adapt Susan Orlean's book "The Orchid Thief." As the film hilariously dramatizes, self-consciousness can be a barrier in conversation, inhibiting flow by making us tense and afraid and hesitant.

Where the lesson comes in: "I'm starting to sweat. Stop sweating," Charlie Kaufman (the character) thinks to himself during a studio meeting. "I've got to stop sweating. Can she see it dripping down my forehead? Ugh, she looked at my hairline. She thinks I'm bald."

"I think you're great," the studio executive replies.

It turns out that Charlie Kaufman (the person) had an actual problem sweating in meetings, so he wrote that into the

movie. But then, after it came out, he noticed that people expected him to sweat, making it okay, in his mind. Then he stopped sweating in meetings! It can be freeing to give voice to something that you're self-conscious about. Once the cat's out of the bag, it can be a license to relax and more deeply enter the conversation. Continuing the sweating example, one strategy is to "[lampshade](#)" whatever's on your mind by...bringing it up. Turn it into a joke. "Look at how much I'm sweating! Sometimes that happens to me indoors. I'm like a basketball player at half-time." Or try just being direct. "Fun fact about me: I tend to sweat a lot!" This tactic definitely requires some bravery, and it may not always be viable, but it's a tool that has the potential to set both parties at ease.