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4 **EMOTION AND FILM THEORY**
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7
8 Norbert Wiley
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11 **ABSTRACT**
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13 *This is a comparison of the emotions we have in watching a movie with*
14 *those we have in everyday life. Everyday emotion is loose in frame or con-*
15 *text but rather controlled and regulated in content. Movie emotion, in con-*
16 *trast, is tightly framed and boundaried but permissive and uncontrolled in*
17 *content. Movie emotion is therefore quite safe and inconsequential but can*
18 *still be unusually satisfying and pleasurable. I think of the movie emotions*
19 *as modeling clay that can symbolize all sorts of human troubles. A major*
20 *function of movies then is catharsis, a term I use more inclusively than*
21 *usual.*

22 *Throughout I use a pragmatist approach to film theory. This position*
23 *gives the optimal distance to the study of ordinary, middle-level emotion.*
24 *In contrast psychoanalysis is too close and cognitive theory too distant.*
25 *This middle position is similar to Arlie Hochschild's symbolic interactionist*
26 *approach to the sociology of emotions, which also mediates between*
27 *psychoanalysis and cognitive theories.*
28

29 **EMOTION AND FILM THEORY**
30

31 This will be an exploration of how emotion works in watching an ordinary Holly-
32 wood movie or others like it. I will be talking only about easy-to-follow movies,
33 not the more artistic or thoughtful kind. The working of emotion in these "easy
34 listening" movies is a controversial issue in film theory. But less so in sociology,
35

36
37 **Studies in Symbolic Interaction**
38 **Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 26, 169–187**
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ISSN: 0163-2396

1 which is the perspective from which I will be writing. In a sense I will be translating
2 film theory into the sociology of emotions and vice versa.

3 First I will position myself among the theoretical options. Drawing on Arlie
4 Hochschild's mid-seventies analysis of emotion in sociology, I will describe three
5 images of human emotions. Emphasis will be placed on the relation between
6 emotions and cognition (Hochschild, 1975, pp. 281–285). Then I will show that
7 approximately the same three positions she described in 1975 are present in film
8 theory today.

9 Her position is called symbolic interaction or constructionism (see also Denzin,
10 1984). The corresponding position in film theory, broadening the scope a bit, might
11 be called pragmatism. I will be writing from this pragmatist point of view.

12 Second I will characterize at some length the emotions we have in watching a
13 film and contrast these with the emotions we have in everyday life. The former, I
14 will argue, are a highly transformed and protected version of the latter.

15 And finally I will ask why movie emotions differ from those of ordinary life.
16 My answer will have to do with the work or functions of emotion in the two
17 situations. Everyday emotions are structured, more or less, for what they do, and
18 movie emotions are, in turn, structured for what they do. The former help us to
19 cope with life, and the latter help us to cope with the coping process.

20 In other words movie emotions are in a second order or "meta" relation to those
21 of everyday life. Since there are many of these second order functions I will select
22 only one for close attention. This will be "catharsis," which I will define more
23 inclusively than usual.

24 25 26 **IMAGES OF THE EMOTIONAL ACTOR** 27

28 Hochschild's three images of the emotional actor were: (1) the conscious, cognitive
29 actor; (2) the unconscious emotional actor; and (3) the sentient actor, who is both
30 conscious and feeling.

31 As Hochschild saw these images the cognitive actor subordinated emotion to
32 cognition and goal-attainment. Similarly the sociologists she discussed theorized
33 social life with little or no attention to emotion. Her key examples were Erving
34 Goffman and Max Weber, though her ideas also applied to Talcott Parsons'
35 "affective neutrality" and rational choice's calculation. In this first image cog-
36 nition trumped emotion, and, given the latter's implied domestication, emotion was
37 virtually ignored.

38 Hochschild's second image was of the Freudian human being whose uncon-
39 scious emotions tacitly and unconsciously ruled conscious life. These emotions,
40 for example one's oedipal (or pre-oedipal) complex, were the dominant if unsensed

1 affects. And one's conscious emotions were veils and masks of these underlying
2 forces. In this case cognition was in the service of (unconscious) emotion, and
3 emotion trumped cognition.

4 Hochschild's key theorists, along with Sigmund Freud, were Philip Slater and
5 Herbert Marcuse, both Freudian leftists and revisionists of the sixties counter-
6 culture. She also referred to several psychologists and anthropologists. Since the
7 time of Hochschild's article there are a variety of new Freudian theorists and those
8 of other psychoanalytic approaches who would be relevant to her analysis.

9 Hochschild's third position, which she was creating in this classic paper, was
10 that of the person who had ordinary emotions and was conscious of these emotions.
11 Cognition did not rule emotion nor did emotion rule cognition. Each had its sphere
12 and, while the two capacities might sometimes work together cooperatively, they
13 might also diverge and work competitively, creating unruly emotions.

14 Interestingly the situation in film theory today is remarkably similar to the
15 three positions Hochschild described in 1975, although the language is somewhat
16 different.

17 In film theory Hochschild's first image, that of the cognitive actor, is present in
18 the cognitive approach. The two spokespersons for this position, [David Bordwell](#)
19 [\(1985\)](#) and [Noel Carroll \(1997\)](#) draw heavily on cognitive theory as it appears
20 in the discipline of psychology. This position was formed partly to contrast with
21 and criticize the psychoanalytic approach. Accordingly it subordinates emotion to
22 cognition and to the pursuit of goals ([Jaffe, 2000](#)).

23 The psychoanalytic approach to film theory, which is based primarily on Lacan
24 rather than Freud, tends to subordinate cognition to emotion ([Baudry, 1975](#); [Dayan,](#)
25 [1974](#); [Metz, 1977](#)). This position was the over-riding one in film theory for some
26 twenty years, but in the late 1980s it began to be heavily criticized, particularly by
27 cognitive theorists, and it may have lost some of its luster. Lacan had been combined
28 with Althusser in a conceptually dense set of ideas known as apparatus theory.
29 This approach, which is still powerful in film studies, is much more influential and
30 carefully worked out than Hochschild's psychoanalytic image was in sociology.
31 But nevertheless it occupies the same conceptual niche, that of a theory in which
32 emotion tends to drive cognition.

33 It should also be pointed out that feminist film theorists have favored a modified
34 form of psychoanalysis, while feminist sociologists, influenced by Hochschild,
35 have been drawn to her approach and not to the sociological version of psycho-
36 analysis. I think this is because psychoanalysis, despite some difficulties, works
37 better in the analysis of movies than in that of daily life.

38 Hochschild's third position, which she herself created, was grounded in symbolic
39 interactionism, constructionism and pragmatism. The corresponding position in
40 film theory is in approximately the same theoretical space as Hochschild. It is

1 also, like her position in 1975, just now in the process of being formed. Among the
 2 major current pragmatists are [Stanley Cavell \(1979, 1996\)](#) and [Ray Carney \(1994\)](#).
 3 Others are [Vincent Colapietro \(2000\)](#), [Martin Lefebvre \(1999\)](#), [Jennifer Hammett](#)
 4 [\(1992, 1997\)](#) and [Wiley \(2000\)](#). In addition some film scholars make selective use
 5 of pragmatist concepts, e.g. [Wollen \(1972\)](#), [de Lauretis \(1984\)](#), [Silverman \(1983\)](#)
 6 and [Deleuze \(1989, 1986\)](#).

7 My analysis of movie spectator emotion will lean in the pragmatist direction.
 8 Given the similarities between pragmatist film theory and Hochschild's construc-
 9 tivism, these two can easily work together and borrow each other's tools. The un-
 10 derlying similarity between the two is one of distance. By this I mean, not aesthetic
 11 distance, but distance from ordinary middle-level emotions. The psychoanalytic
 12 position, both in sociology and film theory, is so close to the big, pre-oedipal and
 13 oedipal emotions that it has trouble focusing on everyday, middle-level feelings.
 14 The cognitive position, again in both disciplines, is so distant from emotion that
 15 it too has trouble dealing with ordinary emotion as such. It is the middle-distance
 16 position of symbolic interaction and pragmatism that is best located for dealing
 17 with emotions as we know them.

18 In this section I argued that the three images of the person in the sociology of
 19 emotions are substantially similar to three current positions in film theory. Presum-
 20 ably this is true, not because of any direct borrowing, but because of the principle
 21 of limited possibilities and what's "in the air." The result though is a convergence
 22 between two academic winds or breezes. In this paper I will be applying sociology
 23 to film theory and trying to catch some of that breeze.

26 REAL VERSUS MOVIE EMOTIONS¹

27
 28 To theorize movie spectator emotions it helps to begin with a description of these
 29 emotions. Artistic emotions are difficult to concretize ([Feagin, 1997](#)) so my list of
 30 descriptive traits will be somewhat abstract. Since I will be making what is in part
 31 a functional or need-based analysis, it is important to ask if any clues to function
 32 can be found in structure. If function follows structure, even a little bit, the latter
 33 is a good place to look for clues to function. In making this structural description I
 34 will be comparing movie emotions to those of everyday life. In other words I will
 35 be listing the ways – seventeen in number as I see it – in which movie emotion
 36 differs from ordinary emotion. This list is not completely self-explanatory, so I
 37 will follow it with a brief explanation of each item ([Table 1](#)).

38 These seventeen items all designate some trait or dimension in which the emotion
 39 of movie watching seems to differ from that of everyday life. As I comment on
 40 them it will become clear that the first thirteen are relatively formal and abstract.

Table 1. Comparison of Movie Spectator Emotion with that of Everyday Life.

	Real World	Movie Spectator World
(1) Risk	Unlimited Risk	Limited Risk
(2) Distance	Natural Distance	Medium Distance
(3) Attention	Close attention	Split Attention
(4) Effects	Indefinite	Often Terminate with End of Movie
(5) Subject	You are the subject	Pseudo-subject (Vicarious Emotions)
(6) World	Everyday World	Movie World
(7) Epoche	Natural Attitude	Movie Reality
(8) Feeling Rules	Normative	Easily Broken without Sanction
(9) Emotion Work	Routinely Required	Rarely Needed
(10) Responsibility	Considerable	None (Emotional Freedom)
(11) Clarity	May Need Labelling	Movie Cues, e.g. Music, do Labelling
(12) Discussable	Often Kept Quiet	More Easily Talked about
(13) Context	One's Whole Life	Context Bound by Frame of Movie
(14) Identification	Cautious	Hedonistic
(15) Frequency	Sporadic	Continuous and Sped Up
(16) Intensity	Ordinary Intensity	Extraordinary Intensity
(17) Range	Normal	Extreme, e.g. Terror, Wild Sex, Bliss

They tend to refer to the boundaries or protective shell that exists around our movie emotions. The last four items shift to the content or substance of emotion. Among these four, I will pay special attention to identification, since the nature of this process is quite controversial in film theory. The conclusion I will be building toward, is that the formal qualities domesticate and tame movie emotions, while the substantive qualities allow them, within that protective shell or perimeter, to run wild.

- (1) *Risk* refers to possible harm the emotion might cause. Intense negative emotion in the main world can be traumatic or at least highly unpleasant. In the movie world, this is almost never so (though *Psycho* and the *Exorcist* were major exceptions). Similarly happy emotions in movies are pretty invulnerable to betrayal and heartbreak. Once you have them, you pretty much have them.
- (2) *Distance*, as Aristotle originated the idea (1983/384–322 B. C., p. 2320), is the psychological proximity one might have to an artistic narrative and its depiction. One can be too close and therefore traumatized; too far, and therefore untouched and bored; or optimally distant and thus effectively moved and, as Aristotle saw it, catharthasized. Appropriate distance differs among cultures, e.g. our narratives are usually less distant than the Greek tragedies.

1 Ordinary emotions are at their own distance, whatever that might be.
 2 Families may differ in emotional styles, but we cannot just dial emotions
 3 up or down. Movie emotions are more amenable to distance control, both
 4 by the people who make them and those who watch them. If we want more
 5 distance and nothing else works, we can always walk out of a movie. It is
 6 harder, in contrast, to walk out on life.

- 7 (3) The movie viewer splits *attention* between the movie, on the one hand, and the
 8 physical theater, the other patrons, etc. on the other. This also helps regulate
 9 distance and creates an aura of safety. After all it's "just a movie." In real
 10 life you can decrease your attention all right, but you cannot peer outside the
 11 frame and peek at another reality as you can with a movie. If you do much
 12 of this you will be living in the wrong world.

13 The patient in a psychotherapist's office, seeking a catharsis similar to the
 14 one movie viewers are often looking for, also splits attention (Scheff, 1979,
 15 p. 60). But this split is not between the movie and its setting; it is between the
 16 remembered or half remembered trauma, on the one hand, and the therapeutic
 17 setting on the other. Still it is a similar attempt to keep the experience under
 18 control and optimize its consequences.

- 19 (4) The *effects* of real emotion are indefinite and open-ended. An emotional ex-
 20 perience can change your whole life. In contrast the effects of movie emotions
 21 are usually minor and tend to end with the movie. They can sometimes have
 22 major effects, e.g. of well being or fear, long after the movie, but this is the
 23 exceptional case. Usually they start tapering off fast when the movie is over.
 24 (5) You are the *subject* of your real life emotions. They are happening to you. The
 25 emotions in a movie are, in the first instance, happening to some character
 26 in the story. They are only happening to you to the extent that you identify,
 27 empathize, sympathize, etc. with that character. Strong as they may be, these
 28 emotions are vicarious or "witness emotions" (Tan, 1995, p. 82) and you
 29 are only the pseudo-subject. The sense in which the viewer is the quasi- or
 30 pseudo-subject is controversial in film theory. The issue quickly gets to the
 31 (closely-guarded) premises that separate one theory from other. But I can
 32 side-step this issue, at least for now. Your movie emotions then are, in a
 33 sense, not yours; whereas your life emotions are only too inescapably your
 34 own.

35 There are also, however, many emotions we experience vicariously in
 36 everyday life, when we are identifying with and "reading" the feelings of our
 37 family members, friends and acquaintances. As with movie emotions, we are
 38 *not* the subject of these everyday emotions. I will return to this question in
 39 item fourteen and look at the difference between these two ways of identifying
 40 with another's emotions.

- 1 (6) Multiple realities or *worlds* is an idea introduced by [William James \(1890\)](#) and
 2 developed by [Alfred Schutz \(1973\)](#). There is the main everyday world and a
 3 variety of special or secondary worlds, including those of the arts and movies.
 4 We enter each reality or world with an act of faith or willing suspension of
 5 disbelief. Schutz discussed a variety of ways in which the worlds differ from
 6 each other, as in the experience of the social, the self, wide-awakeness, the
 7 entering epoche and the passage of time. He did not single out emotion,
 8 but it is clear that emotion too differs from world to world. I have shown
 9 that movie emotion is considerably different from main world or everyday
 10 life emotion. Students of dreams describe still another pattern of emotion,
 11 differing from both everyday life and the film spectator's pattern ([Domhoff,](#)
 12 [1999](#)). The reality location, then, of our two sets of emotions differs by world,
 13 the everyday life set being in the main world and the movie set being in the
 14 movie world.
- 15 (7) *Epoche* was Edmund Husserl's term for a kind of suspension of belief he
 16 used to ground the phenomenological method and the analysis it allowed.
 17 Albert Schutz, combining Husserl and James, said there was a unique epoche
 18 entailed in the entering of any world (1979). If consciousness is like a TV
 19 set, the epoche is like the remote, which moves us from channel to channel
 20 or world to world. To do this one must drop the old set of categories and
 21 adopt new ones, since each world contains a somewhat different set. We do
 22 this very quickly when we enter a movie, and the corresponding emotional
 23 transformation draws on the movie spectator's epoche.
- 24 (8) *Feeling rules* is one of the concepts Hochschild introduced into the sociology
 25 of emotions. Established sociology had been treating emotions as constants
 26 and therefore ignorable. The notion of emotional rules, which regulate time,
 27 place, intensity, style, etc. suggests that emotions are not a constant. When
 28 people break these rules there can be drastic consequences. And it may take
 29 considerable effort to follow these rules.
- 30 The film experience loosens the feeling rules. Men can (secretly) cry, and
 31 women can get angry. You can act way out of character. Kids can act like
 32 adults, and adults like kids. Deviant emotions, normally disallowed, are easily
 33 available. There are still rules, e.g. regarding how loudly or when you can
 34 laugh, but these rules are considerably more permissive than those of real
 35 life.
- 36 (9) *Emotion work* is another of Hochschild's concepts, referring to the effort
 37 it might take to follow rules and make the right emotional impressions.
 38 Suppressing inappropriate emotions, such as laughing during someone's
 39 pompous speech, can be hard work. And summoning up the right emotion,
 40 e.g. feigning interest in that speech, can also be tough. The day is full of

1 emotion work (and in the typical American family women do more of it than
2 men).

3 Emoting at the movies, particular the Hollywood kind, entails very little
4 emotion work. To begin with you are emoting vicariously, so you do not have
5 to construct and steer the feelings as you do in everyday life. In addition the
6 emotional content of these films is usually pre-arranged to cause the least
7 effort and give the most payoff. These movies go down like milk shakes, our
8 suspension of disbelief more or less gulping the experience.

9 (10) One has little *responsibility* for movie emotion. In the first place some char-
10 acter in a film is experiencing it, while you are riding piggy back on them.
11 You will not take the blame or even be inconvenienced for any emotional
12 harm that might befall the characters. It is possible that there could be some
13 carry-over into real life that could cause you trouble, but this would be un-
14 usual and you can guard against it. You can have the emotions of anger,
15 hatred, aggression and so on without anyone getting hurt. And you can have
16 all modalities of love, sex and friendship with no post-movie commitment
17 or entanglement. This experience is as irresponsible as a dream or an act of
18 play. Unlike real emotions, which can affect our relations with others, movie
19 emotions are “freebees.”

20 (11) The *clarity* of movie emotions is much more distinct and unambiguous than
21 that of real life. Real emotions often come all balled up or fused, e.g. guilt
22 and shame, anger and fear, love and jealousy. They can also appear in a vague
23 state of arousal which might need social labelling to get its name or specific
24 character. People confiding their problems to their friends are often asking
25 for emotional clarification.

26 In contrast Hollywood-type movies are usually pre-chewed, dumbed down
27 and oversimplified to the point where there is very little lack of clarity. Nar-
28 ratives are written with precise emotional scripts, often in formulaic fashion.
29 Emotions come with clear labels. This is suspense, this is grief, this is love,
30 this is fear or anger or joy. The naming process is done with body language,
31 dialogue, clearly structured situations, transparent tendencies and musical
32 cues.

33 One of the burdens of real life emotion work is sorting out one’s (or an-
34 other’s) emotions in a mixed-up situation. Movies can give you this ambiguity
35 too, but the kind I am talking about usually do not. Instead they provide a wel-
36 come and neatly-labelled alternate to the emotional confusion of everyday
37 life.

38 (12) *Discussability* is another trait that singles out movie emotions. Many people,
39 particularly of the male gender, are guarded and quiet about their real emo-
40 tions. It is possible that they are somewhat numbed and do not experience

1 emotions very distinctly or consciously. Or it might be that they do not want
 2 to show or talk about these feelings. There are plenty of rules about emotions,
 3 and sometimes these rules are in conflict. Showing or admitting to emotions
 4 might bring down some unnoticed or forgotten or new rule on one's neck.
 5 Emotions imply responsibility.

6 Movie emotions seem a good bit easier to admit and talk about. After all
 7 they are just fantasy, so to speak, and one cannot be blamed for having them.
 8 I think, for example, a husband can say he was attracted to the leading lady
 9 with considerably more impunity from his wife than admitting he is attracted
 10 to the neighbor lady. And wives can also fly this flag.

11 Another feature of discussability is simply the shared or intersubjective
 12 quality of a movie that many have seen. We can all talk about James Bond,
 13 or Lolita or Woody Allen's neurosis or Tom Hanks' moral reliability. These
 14 are part of the social currency and they can quickly move from mind to
 15 mind. Psychiatric trainees, for example, can discuss the emotional qualities
 16 of shared media narratives much more easily than those of real life, their
 17 own or someone else's. Movie emotion then is relatively public and that of
 18 everyday life, much more private.

- 19 (13) The *context* of a movie emotion is largely limited to the boundaries and
 20 duration of the movie. The theater, the neighborhood of the theater, and the
 21 rest of one's life on the day one went to the movie tend to be out of play and
 22 removed from the context. In contrast the context of real life emotions is the
 23 entirety of one's life along with its various environments. Accordingly the
 24 meaning and effects of the emotion are largely determined by the context.
 25 Real life emotions are modified by and radiate into one's entire life. Movie
 26 emotions tend to be confined to the movie.

27 It is true that some movies have long-term effects. The emotional pitches
 28 of the extremely positive or more especially the extremely negative feel-
 29 ings can stay with us and have consequences. People feeling uneasy in the
 30 shower because of the shower scene in *Psycho* is a favorite example. But these
 31 consequential movie emotions are remembered as exceptions. In actual life
 32 all substantial emotion can have effects and interact with one's context. In
 33 movies this are rare.

- 34 (14) Turning now to the substantive items on this list, I will begin with the *identifi-*
 35 *cation* process as mentioned earlier. There is little agreement on exactly what
 36 is meant by identification in film studies, or for that matter in psychoanalysis.
 37 Yet in ordinary conversation people use this term quiter effortlessly. In
 38 item 5 above I distinguished two kinds of identificational or vicarious
 39 emotions, those we have in watching movies and those we have in everyday
 40 life.

1 Recently Gregory Currie (1995) argued that both of these vicarious emotions are like computer simulations and that they are fundamentally the same. Currie uses the term simulation in place of identification, a term he rejects.

2 But the term identification is actually quite flexible and useful. Gaut (1999), for example, points out that there are various nuances and degrees that can be put on this word (and similar terms). And, in contrast to the term simulation, which equates people with computers, the term identification is consistent with common sense and ordinary experience. In addition this term avoids the awkward fact that computers do not actually have emotions.

3 It also seems as though both kinds of everyday emotions, direct and vicarious, differ substantially from movie watching emotions. I just concluded thirteen comparisons of (direct) everyday with movie emotions. If we substitute vicarious everyday emotions, as Currie does, the comparison, though now modified, still holds. Let us say we are trying to sense or imagine the emotions of someone in our immediate world, a friend or family member. We cannot just proceed heedlessly and carelessly as we do in a movie. What we want in sensing a movie character's emotion is pleasure. This is a hedonistically-driven experience, as we normally go to the movies for diversion and immediate gratification. In contrast if we are attending to the emotions of someone whom we care about, we will follow the rules of prudent responsibility and try to get a reasonably accurate reading of the person's feelings. And we will want to *know* the other's emotions but not necessarily *have* them. In watching a movie we usually want to actually have the movie emotion.

4 In addition we interact with real people and relate to them in the second person, as "I" to "you." In movies we never interact with the characters, and as a result we relate to them only in the third person, as "I" to "he" or "she." There are many other differences in what Currie calls the two simulations, but there is no need to mention them all here.

5 The two kinds of identification then, with actual people and with characters in movies, have differing configurations. Movie identifications are quite powerful, almost to the point of merging, with very little constraint or regulation. Everyday life identifications are much more cautious and measured, they are carefully kept at an appropriate distance and there are numerous constraints and regulations. It is the very no-holds-barred quality of movie identifications that makes them such a powerful experience and leads to my last three items.²

- 6 (15) A case in point is *frequency* or density of emotion in movie watching. When you attend a movie the emotion starts right away, and if you first sit through the coming attractions your nerves may already be in a jangle. You probably have some idea of the story, so you are poised to react to your mental model.

1 Movie narratives tend to follow the usual “stability-instability-restability”
2 form, so you are perhaps already anticipating or leaning into that destabiliz-
3 ing turn of the plot and the ensuing emotion. The music is geared to move
4 you along and place you in the appropriate emotional channels. In other
5 words you have interest right from the start.

6 The word “interest,” however is controversial in film theory. [David](#)
7 [Bordwell \(1985\)](#) and [Noel Carroll \(1997\)](#), who like to subsume emotion
8 under cognition, interpret interest in the story as a cognitive force, not an
9 emotional one. We want to know what will happen, we anticipate future
10 events, and the resolution of the story has a satisfying quenching effect on
11 our curiosity. In contrast, Ed Tan, the Danish film theorist, interprets that
12 same interest as an emotional force (1995, p. 83). Indeed he fuses cognition
13 and emotion, but there is no doubt that he sees our close following of the
14 plot and our foreshadowing of various possible developments as an event of
15 passion. Just as we may identify with given characters, we identify with the
16 story as a whole (or with the “camera”). This narrative identification creates,
17 for Tan, the emotion of interest. In any event we start right off exuding
18 affect, and, in a well-wrought Hollywood movie, we can ride this affect,
19 wherever it takes us, right to the end.

20 In the approximately two hours the movie may last, there is usually a
21 great deal more emotion than in a comparable two hours of our typical day.
22 This is partly because time is usually sped up in a movie, i.e. instead of there
23 being only the two hours of real time, the movie may depict two days, two
24 weeks or even several years. As Schutz pointed out the flow of time differs
25 from world to world ([Flaherty, 1999](#)) and films can stretch real time to great
26 lengths.

27 But in addition to the temporally dense feature of movies they usually
28 entail a lot more excitement and passion than we find in a typical day. Things
29 happen to these people: lives twist, people merge, evil pervades, bliss comes
30 and goes, sadness overtakes, happiness finally arrives, horror paralyzes, and
31 in general people tend to live packed and nerve-jangling lives in those paltry
32 two hours. It counts that emotions tend toward clarity because this allows
33 more emotion. We don’t stop and try to figure out what just happened. The
34 story moves us along. Despite the carefully fenced in boundaries of a movie,
35 the emotions within that fence are thick and wild. They are frequent, dense
36 and almost wall-to-wall.

37 (16) In addition to being densely packed, movie emotions tend to be quite *intense*.
38 People watching movies laugh and cry more spontaneously and forcefully
39 than in ordinary life. This is partly because of the various formal qualities,
40 such as clarity and irresponsibility, that heighten the affective volume. There

1 is also a social effect, particularly in humor, as the whole audience laughs
2 at once.

3 It may even be that people are more open to emotion in movies than in
4 life, thereby making a moderate amount of affect go a long way. There seems
5 to be little doubt that men, who tend to be emotionally illiterate and numb,
6 thaw out a bit and experience movie emotion more intensely than those of
7 their actual lives. The theater is dark, nobody is watching, the emotional
8 loadings are powerful, and people may even regress to childhood (or their
9 unconscious), as many a film theory claims.

10 The protective shell, as suggested by my formal analysis, also invites
11 releasing inhibitions. If this were real life and one had to, somehow, respond
12 to grief, suspense, heartbreak, explosive love or ecstasy, one might be a bit
13 cautious and hesitant. But this is not real life. It's a completely free and
14 encapsulated romp, and you can pretty much do (read "feel") as you want.
15 This is not to mention whatever compensatory or escapist needs you may
16 also be satisfying.

17 (17) In addition to frequency and intensity, one might experience new or rarely
18 encountered emotions at the show. One's *range* might expand. This is
19 especially true for emotions that belong to other demographic groups, such
20 as the opposite gender or age grouping. For young people the vicarious
21 participation in adult emotions might sometimes have the educational value
22 of "anticipatory socialization," assuming it is not too much too soon. In any
23 event many a young person figured it out at the movies: how to kiss, how
24 to talk on a date, how to confront parents, how to order in a restaurant, and
25 how to endure heartbreak. And the reverse works too. Adults can find out
26 about kids (today), and in their hearts act like kids.

27 Men can taste the feelings of women and women can feel like men. Pre-
28 sumably one may also have these opportunities in the ordinary cross-gender
29 situations of everyday life. But the movies are louder and larger than life,
30 so you get a better glimpse into the other gender. This is not to say women
31 don't gripe about "boy movies," and men don't bridle at three-hanky flicks.
32 A little goes a long way, but my point is merely that the range of movie
33 emotions is wider than that of everyday life, not that anyone finds all corners
34 of this range endlessly fascinating.

35 But all emotions, not just those of one's binary opposites, can come at
36 the extremes of the range. Take suspense for example, which is a staple of
37 the best-seller movie. Done well, the vicarious experience of suspense is
38 strangely relaxing. One feels better afterwards. There are many guesses as to
39 the psychology of this, and I will soon explore the catharsis hypothesis, but
40 the simple frequency of suspense in movies is far greater than the suspense

1 in a typical life. So too for horror, bliss, sadness and grief, triumph and
2 ecstasies of various kinds. This range, particularly at the extremes, is far
3 greater than in life.

4 To summarize part two, the emotions we experience in movies are quite
5 different from those of ordinary life. In life the environment or boundary of
6 emotion is unlimited and open, while the emotions themselves are usually
7 controlled and measured. In movies the context or environment is limited,
8 while the substance is intense and wild. Life emotions are open in form
9 and relatively closed in substance. Movie emotions are closed in form and
10 relatively open in substance. In other words movie emotions reverse those
11 of life. The next question is what is going on here, why does it work this
12 way, how to explain the relation between movies and life?
13

14
15 **WHY MOVIE EMOTIONS ARE DIFFERENT?**
16

17 The effects of movies on the viewer are quite complex, and I will not try to
18 enumerate or discuss them all. For example I will suspend the important issue
19 of ideological influences. There is little doubt that movies usually reinforce the
20 economic or class ideology, along with other dominant values, of the country that
21 produces them. The emotions of the viewer, manipulated as they are by the movie
22 makers, are nudged toward political conservatism, i.e. toward accepting the basic
23 socio-economic system as it stands.

24 On the other hand, not going to the movies (and doing something else instead),
25 also probably has ideological effects. We live in a sea of ideology, and, while some
26 situations are more ideological than others, the built-in biases of any society tend
27 to be all-enveloping and constant.

28 I will look at the ordinary psychological effects of movie emotions. When people
29 are asked why they attend movies they give common sense answers, such as to
30 be entertained, to escape boredom, to get respite from their problems, to get new
31 experience or information and, sometimes, to get an artistic thrill (Tan, 1995, pp.
32 17–18). Many of these motives and outcomes can be captured with terms such as
33 relief, comfort or escape. We enter the movie troubled in some way, we watch it,
34 and this watching temporarily lifts our burdens.

35 This lifting process has often been referred to, from Aristotle’s time to today, as a
36 kind of catharsis or purgation. The notion of catharsis is imprecise, unstandardized
37 and limited for explaining the effects of artistic narratives. For Aristotle, it referred
38 to the release of tension that had been induced by the narratives themselves – in
39 his case the Greek tragedies. The plays both caused and catharsized or released the
40 tension. Others think artistic catharsis relieves tension induced by psychological

Please check the reference Tan, 1995 which is missing in the reference list.

1 traumas, residing and festering in the unconscious (Scheff, 1979). Still others think
 2 it is the unconscious urges of sex and violence that get catharthised, this occurring
 3 through some kind of artistic sublimation (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972, p. 293). And
 4 there are yet other candidates for explaining this process.

5 To impose some clarification on the concept of catharsis, at least in my version,
 6 I will list the several modes of psychological relief that may be involved:

- 7 (1) *Story-induced troubles*. From the movie narrative itself – tension builds up and
 8 then gets released by the resolution of the story. This was Aristotle’s point.
- 9 (2) *Unconscious traumas*. The blows of life, especially early life, that were too
 10 painful to be experienced and were therefore numbed and buried in the un-
 11 conscious.
- 12 (3) *Unconscious urges*. The id-based desires for sex and aggression which are
 13 tamed by the superego but nevertheless chafe for expression.
- 14 (4) *Conscious troubles*. These include any painful experiences that still hurt and
 15 need relief. Some of these are more physical and some are more psychological.
 16 (a) *Physical*. This includes problems of the body: illness, incapacity and phys-
 17 ical suffering of any kind. This can be stretched to include the deaths of
 18 loved ones, along with the loss and grief this might bring about.
- 19 (b) *Psychological*. This includes psychological problems and non-physical
 20 losses, such as family troubles, lost friends and departed lovers. Also
 21 loneliness and alienation from society.
- 22 (5) The *Universal Evils*. These are the problems that religion is all about. They
 23 are relatively constant and widely shared in human life.
 24 (a) *Existential evils*, including human suffering and death in general, and also
 25 a certain “meaninglessness and senselessness” (Max Weber) that charac-
 26 terizes human life as such.
- 27 (b) *Historical evils*. These are the inequalities, miseries and oppressions that
 28 can come from dominating classes and oppressive political regimes. These
 29 evils are not completely universal since there must be a certain amount of
 30 economic development to make them possible in the first place.

31
 32 The preceding list of five kinds of troubles is an attempt to include them all. These
 33 are the pains that humans have, and such institutions as religion, psychotherapy
 34 and art seem to be pointed at alleviating these troubles.

35 The idea of catharsis can apply to any and all of these problems. And the relief
 36 can be partial or, much less likely, complete. In large part we go to the movies, the
 37 psychotherapist and the religionist for relief from these burdens.

38 In the first instance these problems go through the emotions of our daily life,
 39 those I have been calling for the sake of convenience the “real” emotions. In
 40 this passage they leave a residue of pain and trouble, which can remain with us

1 indefinitely. Then as a kind of second-order or meta process they might again
2 be confronted by the catharsis-seeking institutions I mentioned above: religion,
3 psychotherapy and the arts. Since everyone has more or less the same sorts of
4 problems, though not to the same degree, movies can speak to almost everyone by
5 touching the right themes.

6 But why are real and movie emotion so different if they are both confronting
7 the same mix of life problems? I think the answer is in how these two sets of
8 emotion deal with problems. The real life emotions are associated with an attempt
9 to actually solve, or at least directly face, these problems. The movie (and
10 other artistic) emotions are associated with an attempt to “symbolically” solve
11 these problems. An actual, non-symbolic solution would resolve the problem in
12 the real world. A symbolic solution would be a model or image of a solution, possibly
13 quite comforting to visualize, but with no real world effects (except for the
14 comforting).

15 For example, in the movie *Blink* (1994) Madeline Stowe, who had been blinded
16 in childhood by her mother in a fit of rage, confronted her blindness in two ways.
17 When the movie began she was only using symbolic solutions, namely playing the
18 violin and drinking (too much) wine. But as the movie proceeded she got an operation
19 and gradually had her sight restored (while being stalked by a serial killer).

20 Art and religion give symbolic solutions to problems, and these may provide
21 partial relief or catharsis. The movie pattern of strict form and loose content is a
22 powerful means for building symbolic solutions. In other words the movie in some
23 way *solves* the problem, or even stacks of problems. The actual movie emotions
24 with all their frequency (density), intensity and range provide a kind of modeling
25 clay that can be shaped to resemble anything we, or rather the movie makers, want.
26 The strict formal limits have the effect of confining the models to an imaginary
27 world while still providing satisfaction.

28 Like the “symbolic immortalities” of various religions (Lifton, 1970) the movie
29 solutions provide imaginary or rather artistic solutions to life’s problems. The
30 fact that Lifton’s immortalities are symbolic gives them free reign to promise a lot,
31 much as the tightened form or frame of movie emotions, along with their relatively
32 unleashed substance, also promises a lot.

33 The emotions of dreams, as previously mentioned, are different from those of
34 movies, but Freud’s idea of “wish fulfillment” as a key to understanding dreams,
35 is perhaps even more true of movies.

36 As I mentioned, catharsis is not the only function or effect of movies. There
37 are many others, which I have chosen to set aside in this paper. But catharsis is
38 useful for understanding the interesting pattern of movie emotions. For, the tight-
39 frame, loose-content feature of these emotions is a highly suitable material for
40 manufacturing cathartic solutions to almost any human problem.

CONCLUSION

1
2
3 I began by showing that the theoretical landscape in film theory today, particularly
4 as it concerns the emotions of the spectator, is much like the set of options Arlie
5 Hochschild described concerning the discipline of sociology in 1975. It seems
6 there are certain positions on the emotion-cognition relation that are likely to turn
7 up in any discipline. Theories that especially emphasize cognition or deep emotion
8 and thereby tend to ignore ordinary, middle-level emotion, may be inevitable. But
9 Hochschild was one of the first in sociology to take ordinary emotions in all their
10 autonomous force on their own terms. She created a language and a perspective
11 for examining this field, and she showed how the management of these emotions
12 is an increasingly important aspect of the capitalist economy.

13 I then applied the pragmatist perspective, using Hochschild's approach and concepts,
14 to the special problem of movie spectator emotions. I showed that most aspects
15 of these emotions are tamer, more disciplined and more narrowly framed than
16 the emotions of everyday life. On the other hand the actual substance or content
17 of these emotions, which I described as frequency, intensity and range, is far more
18 open and wild than the emotions of everyday life. The movie emotional pattern
19 virtually reverses that of ordinary life.

20 In asking why this might be, I used the analogy of modelling clay. Real life has
21 loads of problems, some solvable and most not. In contrast the movies have the
22 perfect materials for providing symbolic or imaginary solutions, thus giving us the
23 temporary and escapist satisfaction of living in a better world. I referred to this
24 symbolic relief as catharsis and tried to list all the orders of human problems that
25 need this relief. Of course it is not news to say the movies give catharsis. But I
26 think my analysis of movie emotions in their form and substance gives a new and
27 useful picture of how the cathartic process comes about.

28 I simply side-stepped the problem of ideology, which is intensely controversial in
29 film theory, because I wanted to do something else. But the tight-frame, permissive-
30 content configuration of movie emotions also looks nicely suited for distributing
31 "bread and circuses" to a population, however inequitable the overall institutions
32 may be.

33 I might also suggest that Durkheim's theory of religious ritual ([Durkheim, 1912](#))
34 as the producer of social solidarity and meaning could be plugged into the movie
35 pattern. Just as Durkheim's rituals themselves are symbolic, have a tight social
36 frame and unlimited emotional content, movies are a neat conduit for a similar
37 product. In fact many movies have a strongly solidaristic effect on ethnic groups,
38 genders and national populations.

39 I am aware that Hochschild's is not the only approach to the sociology of emo-
40 tions. Since her breakthrough article of 1975 there have been several new positions,

1 often competitive with hers (Barbalet, 1998, pp. 21–26). But for my purposes in
2 this paper, making sense of film theory and the problem of spectator emotions, her
3 approach is highly useful.

4 Finally let me mention what seems to be the next step for the ideas of this paper.
5 If I have successfully characterized movie-watching emotions, then it should be
6 possible to analyze the emotional content and cathartic functions of particular
7 movies with these ideas. It should also be possible to do this to types or genres of
8 movies: suspense, love, “action,” comedy, etc.

9
10
11 **NOTES**

12
13 1. When I say “real” I do not mean movie emotions or the movie world are not real. As
14 James (1890) and Schutz (1973) argued, there are many worlds or realities. Instead I am
15 speaking loosely, and merely mean the main, everyday reality.

16 2. One’s identification with a movie and with particular characters in a movie is height-
17 ened, as I explained in another place (Wiley, 2000), by the fact that the movie runs on an
18 “inner screen.” This screen is the internal dialogical system, the I-you-me circuitry of prag-
19 matism’s dialogical self. The self is, in a way, a language, i.e. an inner language, especially
20 the inner pronouns. These pronouns, like the “outer” pronouns of ordinary language, can be
21 occupied by someone, usually our selves, or they can be generic and empty. When occupied,
22 as we engage in thoughts or daydreams, these pronouns are, to relocate Saussure’s termi-
23 nology, “parole.” When unoccupied they are Saussure’s “langue.” If we allow some external
24 dialogue, e.g. that of a movie or other artistic narrative, to enter these inner niches we experi-
25 ence this dialogue as though it were going on inside our self. The movie, via the parole-langue
26 swinging door, becomes, so to speak, our very selves. Thus, the intensity of the identifica-
27 tion and the closeness of the emotions. If we do not like the movie we keep it at a distance,
28 do not allow it into our inner speech chambers and it does not really become “ourselves.”

29
30
31 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

32 This paper was initially a guest lecture in Julianne Burton-Carvajal’s class in film
33 studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I am grateful for her comments
34 and for those of her students. Thanks are also due to Michael Flaherty, Ira Jaffe,
35 David Westby and G. William Domhoff.

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