EMOTION AND FILM THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This is a comparison of the emotions we have in watching a movie with those we have in everyday life. Everyday emotion is loose in frame or context but rather controlled and regulated in content. Movie emotion, in contrast, is tightly framed and boundary but permissive and uncontrolled in content. Movie emotion is therefore quite safe and inconsequential but can still be unusually satisfying and pleasurable. I think of the movie emotions as modeling clay that can symbolize all sorts of human troubles. A major function of movies then is catharsis, a term I use more inclusively than usual.

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

EMOTION AND FILM THEORY

This will be an exploration of how emotion works in watching an ordinary Hollywood movie or others like it. I will be talking only about easy-to-follow movies, not the more artistic or thoughtful kind. The working of emotion in these “easy listening” movies is a controversial issue in film theory. But less so in sociology,
which is the perspective from which I will be writing. In a sense I will be translating film theory into the sociology of emotions and vice versa.

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

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

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

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

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

IMAGES OF THE EMOTIONAL ACTOR

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

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

Hochschild’s second image was of the Freudian human being whose subconscious emotions tacitly and unconsciously ruled conscious life. These emotions, for example one’s oedipal (or pre-oedipal) complex, were the dominant if unsensed
affects. And one's conscious emotions were veils and masks of these underlying
forces. In this case cognition was in the service of (unconscious) emotion, and
emotion trumped cognition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hochschild's third position, which she herself created, was grounded in symbolic
interactionism, constructionism and pragmatism. The corresponding position in
film theory is in approximately the same theoretical space as Hochschild. It is
also, like her position in 1975, just now in the process of being formed. Among the
major current pragmatists are Stanley Cavell (1979, 1996) and Ray Carney (1994).
Others are Vincent Colapietro (2000), Martin Lefebvre (1999), Jennifer Hammett
(1992, 1997) and Wiley (2000). In addition some film scholars make selective use
of pragmatist concepts, e.g. Wollen (1972), de Lauretis (1984), Silverman (1983)

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

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

REAL VERSUS MOVIE EMOTIONS

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

These seventeen items all designate some trait or dimension in which the emotion
of movie watching seems to differ from that of everyday life. As I comment on
them it will become clear that the first thirteen are relatively formal and abstract.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Real World</th>
<th>Movie Spectator World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Risk</td>
<td>Unlimited Risk</td>
<td>Limited Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Distance</td>
<td>Natural Distance</td>
<td>Medium Distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Attention</td>
<td>Close attention</td>
<td>Split Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Effects</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
<td>Often Terminate with End of Movie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Subject</td>
<td>You are the subject</td>
<td>Pseudo-subject (Vicarious Emotions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) World</td>
<td>Everyday World</td>
<td>Movie World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Epoche</td>
<td>Natural Attitude</td>
<td>Movie Reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Feeling Rules</td>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>Easily Broken without Sanction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Emotion Work</td>
<td>Routinely Required</td>
<td>Rarely Needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Responsibility</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>None (Emotional Freedom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) Clarity</td>
<td>May Need Labelling</td>
<td>Movie Cues, e.g. Music, do Labelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Discussable</td>
<td>Often Kept Quiet</td>
<td>More Easily Talked about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) Context</td>
<td>One’s Whole Life</td>
<td>Context Bound by Frame of Movie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) Identification</td>
<td>Cautious</td>
<td>Hedonistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) Frequency</td>
<td>Sporadic</td>
<td>Continuous and Sped Up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) Intensity</td>
<td>Ordinary Intensity</td>
<td>Extraordinary Intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) Range</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Extreme, e.g. Terror, Wild Sex, Bliss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, catharsized. Appropriate distance differs among cultures, e.g. our narratives are usually less distant than the Greek tragedies.
Ordinary emotions are at their own distance, whatever that might be. Families may differ in emotional styles, but we cannot just dial emotions up or down. Movie emotions are more amenable to distance control, both by the people who make them and those who watch them. If we want more distance and nothing else works, we can always walk out of a movie. It is harder, in contrast, to walk out on life.

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

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

(4) The effects of real emotion are indefinite and open-ended. An emotional experience can change your whole life. In contrast the effects of movie emotions are usually minor and tend to end with the movie. They can sometimes have major effects, e.g. of well being or fear, long after the movie, but this is the exceptional case. Usually they start tapering off fast when the movie is over.

(5) You are the subject of your real life emotions. They are happening to you. The emotions in a movie are, in the first instance, happening to some character in the story. They are only happening to you to the extent that you identify, empathize, sympathize, etc. with that character. Strong as they may be, these emotions are vicarious or “witness emotions” (Tan, 1995, p. 82) and you are only the pseudo-subject. The sense in which the viewer is the quasi-or pseudo-subject is controversial in film theory. The issue quickly gets to the (closely-guarded) premises that separate one theory from other. But I can side-step this issue, at least for now. Your movie emotions then are, in a sense, not yours; whereas your life emotions are only too inescapably your own.

There are also, however, many emotions we experience vicariously in everyday life, when we are identifying with and “reading” the feelings of our family members, friends and acquaintances. As with movie emotions, we are not the subject of these everyday emotions. I will return to this question in item fourteen and look at the difference between these two ways of identifying with another’s emotions.
(6) Multiple realities or worlds is an idea introduced by William James (1890) and
developed by Alfred Schutz (1973). There is the main everyday world and a
variety of special or secondary worlds, including those of the arts and movies.
We enter each reality or world with an act of faith or willing suspension of
disbelief. Schutz discussed a variety of ways in which the worlds differ from
each other, as in the experience of the social, the self, wide-awareness, the
entering epoche and the passage of time. He did not single out emotion,
but it is clear that emotion too differs from world to world. I have shown
that movie emotion is considerably different from main world or everyday
life emotion. Students of dreams describe still another pattern of emotion,
differing from both everyday life and the film spectator’s pattern (Domhoff,
1999). The reality location, then, of our two sets of emotions differs by world,
the everyday life set being in the main world and the movie set being in the
movie world.

(7) Epoche was Edmund Husserl’s term for a kind of suspension of belief he
used to ground the phenomenological method and the analysis it allowed.
Albert Schutz, combining Husserl and James, said there was a unique epoche
entailed in the entering of any world (1979). If consciousness is like a TV
set, the epoche is like the remote, which moves us from channel to channel
or world to world. To do this one must drop the old set of categories and
adopt new ones, since each world contains a somewhat different set. We do
this very quickly when we enter a movie, and the corresponding emotional
transformation draws on the movie spectator’s epoche.

(8) Feeling rules is one of the concepts Hochschild introduced into the sociology
of emotions. Established sociology had been treating emotions as constants
and therefore ignorable. The notion of emotional rules, which regulate time,
place, intensity, style, etc. suggests that emotions are not a constant. When
people break these rules there can be drastic consequences. And it may take
considerable effort to follow these rules.

The film experience loosens the feeling rules. Men can (secretly) cry, and
women can get angry. You can act way out of character. Kids can act like
adults, and adults like kids. Deviant emotions, normally disallowed, are easily
available. There are still rules, e.g. regarding how loudly or when you can
laugh, but these rules are considerably more permissive than those of real
life.

(9) Emotion work is another of Hochschld’s concepts, referring to the effort
it might take to follow rules and make the right emotional impressions.
Suppressing inappropriate emotions, such as laughing during someone’s
pompous speech, can be hard work. And summoning up the right emotion,
e.g. feigning interest in that speech, can also be tough. The day is full of
emotion work (and in the typical American family women do more of it than men).

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

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

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

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

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

Discussability is another trait that singles out movie emotions. Many people, particularly of the male gender, are guarded and quiet about their real emotions. It is possible that they are somewhat numbed and do not experience
emotions very distinctly or consciously. Or it might be that they do not want
to show or talk about these feelings. There are plenty of rules about emotions,
and sometimes these rules are in conflict. Showing or admitting to emotions
might bring down some unnoticed or forgotten or new rule on one’s neck.
Emotions imply responsibility.

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

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

The context of a movie emotion is largely limited to the boundaries and
duration of the movie. The theater, the neighborhood of the theater, and the
rest of one’s life on the day one went to the movie tend to be out of play and
removed from the context. In contrast the context of real life emotions is the
entirety of one’s life along with its various environments. Accordingly the
meaning and effects of the emotion are largely determined by the context.
Real life emotions are modified by and radiate into one’s entire life. Movie
emotions tend to be confined to the movie.

It is true that some movies have long-term effects. The emotional pitches
of the extremely positive or more especially the extremely negative feel-

ings can stay with us and have consequences. People feeling uneasy in the
shower because of the shower scene in Psycho is a favorite example. But these
consequential movie emotions are remembered as exceptions. In actual life
all substantial emotion can have effects and interact with one’s context. In
movies this are rare.

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

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

In addition to being densely packed, movie emotions tend to be quite intense. People watching movies laugh and cry more spontaneously and forcefully than in ordinary life. This is partly because of the various formal qualities, such as clarity and irresponsibility, that heighten the affective volume. There
is also a social effect, particularly in humor, as the whole audience laughs
at once.

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

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

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

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

But all emotions, not just those of one’s binary opposites, can come at
the extremes of the range. Take suspense for example, which is a staple of
the best-seller movie. Done well, the vicarious experience of suspense is
strangely relaxing. One feels better afterwards. There are many guesses as to
the psychology of this, and I will soon explore the catharsis hypothesis, but
the simple frequency of suspense in movies is far greater than the suspense
in a typical life. So too for horror, bliss, sadness and grief, triumph and
eccasies of various kinds. This range, particularly at the extremes, is far
greater than in life.

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

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

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

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

This lifting process has often been referred to, from Aristotle’s time to today, as a
kind of catharsis or purgation. The notion of catharsis is imprecise, unstandardized
and limited for explaining the effects of artistic narratives. For Aristotle, it referred
to the release of tension that had been induced by the narratives themselves – in
his case the Greek tragedies. The plays both caused and catharsized or released the
tension. Others think artistic catharsis relieves tension induced by psychological
traumas, residing and festering in the unconscious (Scheff, 1979). Still others think it is the unconscious urges of sex and violence that get catharthsized, this occurring through some kind of artistic sublimation (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972, p. 293). And there are yet other candidates for explaining this process.

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

(1) **Story-induced troubles.** From the movie narrative itself – tension builds up and then gets released by the resolution of the story. This was Aristotle’s point.

(2) **Unconscious traumas.** The blows of life, especially early life, that were too painful to be experienced and were therefore numbed and buried in the unconscious.

(3) **Unconscious urges.** The id-based desires for sex and aggression which are tamed by the superego but nevertheless chafe for expression.

(4) **Conscious troubles.** These include any painful experiences that still hurt and need relief. Some of these are more physical and some are more psychological.
   - (a) **Physical.** This includes problems of the body: illness, incapacity and physical suffering of any kind. This can be stretched to include the deaths of loved ones, along with the loss and grief this might bring about.
   - (b) **Psychological.** This includes psychological problems and non-physical losses, such as family troubles, lost friends and departed lovers. Also loneliness and alienation from society.

(5) **The Universal Evils.** These are the problems that religion is all about. They are relatively constant and widely shared in human life.
   - (a) **Existential evils,** including human suffering and death in general, and also a certain “meaninglessness and senselessness” (Max Weber) that characterizes human life as such.
   - (b) **Historical evils.** These are the inequalities, miseries and oppressions that can come from dominating classes and oppressive political regimes. These evils are not completely universal since there must be a certain amount of economic development to make them possible in the first place.

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

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

In the first instance these problems go through the emotions of our daily life, those I have been calling for the sake of convenience the “real” emotions. In this passage they leave a residue of pain and trouble, which can remain with us
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indefinitely. Then as a kind of second-order or meta process they might again
be confronted by the catharsis-seeking institutions I mentioned above: religion,
psychotherapy and the arts. Since everyone has more or less the same sorts of
problems, though not to the same degree, movies can speak to almost everyone by
touching the right themes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am aware that Hochschild’s is not the only approach to the sociology of emotions. Since her breakthrough article of 1975 there have been several new positions,
often competitive with hers (Barbalet, 1998, pp. 21–26). But for my purposes in this paper, making sense of film theory and the problem of spectator emotions, her approach is highly useful.

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

NOTES

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

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

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REFERENCES


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Uncited references