Reflecting on the Image:
Sartrean Emotions in the Writings of Andre Bazin

The familiar version of Andre Bazin's thought in film theory emphasizes the ontological assumptions and the humanist aesthetic prescriptions in his writing. A film should point us toward the world, according to Bazin, toward the innately ambiguous reality that surrounds us. The cinema is uniquely suited for this task, Bazin argues, because its mechanical process conveys to the audience a psychologically convincing illusion of reality. The world can speak complexly to us through the tracings it leaves in the film if filmmakers approach their task appropriately. Bazin admonishes filmmakers to approach the world with humility and honesty, to let the ambiguities present in the world speak to us, not to squelch these ambiguities by shaping reality too harshly for their own ends. Certain aesthetic devices (particularly the long take and deep focus) are more likely to transform the world in a way that does not do violence to it, allowing the real world to speak complexly to audiences.

Clearly these ontological and aesthetic stances are central to an understanding of Bazin, but this emphasis neglects the important role that the emotions play in the Bazinian system. Bazin not only championed a certain humanist aesthetic, but also advocated a particular emotional stance
toward the world presented by the film. For Bazin certain types of emotional experiences tend to point audiences toward ambiguous reality, and others do not. Bazin’s emotional prescriptions underwrite his more famous ontological and aesthetic assertions.

But Bazin was not writing a theory of emotion. Instead he leaned on the understanding of emotion articulated by the most influential French thinker of his day, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre’s theories of emotional and imaginative consciousness lie at the heart of Bazin’s emotional prescriptions. This essay articulates Bazin’s conception of emotion and roots it in Sartre’s writings on emotion, imagination, and consciousness. An understanding of the Sartrean model of emotion that Bazin uses gives us insight into the prescriptions Bazin made for the cinema. Bazin prefers the neorealists to Alfred Hitchcock not only because of their aesthetic choices concerning mise-en-scene, editing, etc. but also because of the emotional choices these filmmakers made.

**Emotional Metanarratives**

What is emotion for Bazin? Bazin most clearly reveals his concept as he encounters individual texts and responds to them in print. Bazin, particularly in his pre-1950 writing, publicly models a critic’s emotions. The emotions he exhibits in his reviews exemplify the stance of an impassioned critic deeply concerned with the state and progress of cinema. By modeling these emotions, he hopes to create an example for others to imitate, to show others how to respond emotionally to the cinema.

The emotional nature of Bazin’s prose cannot be overlooked, because it is central to the pleasure of reading his reviews. The emotions Bazin most often exhibits in his pre-1950 writing are hope and despair, two forceful and dramatic states. Bazin’s criticism attempts to involve the reader in an almost melodramatic narrative of the cinema’s progression. A film falls short of expectations (such as Jean Delannoy’s *L’Eternel Retour* (1943)), and Bazin is injured: “one suffers from not feeling the soul of the drama fill this magnificent body” (*French Cinema*, 42). A film surprises Bazin with its achievement, and Bazin is buoyed with hope for the cinema. Marcel Carne’s *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (1942) gave Bazin hope for the future of French cinema, only to have the disappointments of subsequent seasons of French filmmaking bring him “close to despair” (*French Cinema*, 30). Jean Gremillon’s *Le Ciel Est a Vous* (1943) buoys his hopes, and later films such as Louis Daquin’s *Premier de Cordee* (1944) dash them. Looking back on 1940-41, he says, “We were ready to believe that our cinema was condemned. But even as we listened to the demon of despair, there was already being erected under the sky of Provence the great white chateau that Marcel Carne was to make the bastion of our hopes” (*French Cinema*, 95). When master scenarist Jacques Prevert takes the director’s chair in *Adieu Leonard* (1943), the results are “awkward
and slow enough to inspire despair” (French Cinema, 29). Following the cinema seems to be an emotional rollercoaster ride for Bazin. When expectations are surpassed, he is exuberant; when they are disappointed, he is nearly despondent.

Emotions in this stage of Bazin’s writing are not elicited primarily by single works, but by considering their places within larger frameworks. Bazin situates the individual text within larger narratives: the evolution of the French film industry, the progress of an auteur toward mastery, or the continuity of a character like Chaplin’s Charlie. For example, Bazin argues that Monsieur Verdoux (1947) works because of the love we have developed for the Charlie character, in spite of the moral shortcomings of Verdoux himself (What Is Cinema v. 2, 112). Bazin follows the up-and-down aesthetic achievements of such filmmakers as Marcel Carne and Louis Daquin, and such auteurs are featured characters in the story he tells of the French film’s progress.

Without knowledge of an auteur’s previous work (for instance, when Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon (1950) suddenly appeared in the West), Bazin can be at a loss as to how to respond to the text. If one does not interpret a film within an appropriate frame of reference, one can misread a cinematic masterpiece as being “flawed” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 130-1). The auteuristic framework is key to an audience’s full experience of the text: “[A]n ever-deepening knowledge of the lives of [film] authors . . . allows us to discover new relations which clarify and enrich our understanding of the works” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 136). Narratives of auteurism and historical evolution create expectations for the individual text, and confirming and disconfirming these expectations create strong emotions (such as hope and despair) for Bazin. These metanarratives provide the emotional context for viewing individual texts.

Certain individual films do have significance in that they contribute to the overall progress of cinema. A great work by a film master strives toward the new and advances the larger narrative of cinematic evolution, according to Bazin: “Genius in the realm of films must always strive toward the new. However beautiful it might be, any film that does not further the cinema is not wholly worthy of its name” (Cinema of Cruelty, 25). Beautiful individual films are important to the extent that they advance the cinema aesthetic. Important single films can change the story of film evolution by altering the context for emotionally interpreting later films, raising expectations for future work that are either exceeded or disappointed.

Emotions are not solely elicited across texts but also may be evoked within texts. Here again expectations are key. As Bazin discusses in his essay on The Bicycle Thief (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), a viewer in a narrative film is constantly looking forward in a chain of “thens,” an emphasis on succession of events that the cinema inherits from the novel (What Is Cinema v. 2, 58). In Bazin’s well-known analogy, “the mind has to leap from one
event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 35). Even in a film that one has seen before and knows the plot, the viewer’s mind moves ahead to anticipate what comes ahead. Bazin notes that the viewer’s pleasure increases upon repeated viewings of the best Chaplin films because of the subtle delight of anticipating a perfectly executed gag” (What Is Cinema v. 1, 147-8). Context and expectation are central to the viewer’s pleasure in watching an individual film.

Bazin was deeply concerned with insuring that film audiences were well informed concerning the social/historical/technical context of a film’s production. His “school for spectators” (French Cinema, 69) was devoted to teaching audiences the history of the cinematic form. His efforts at organizing cine-clubs and his public lectures as well as his written criticism in the postwar period were devoted to the development of film audiences. Not only did he model the critic’s reactions to films (as discussed above), but also he educated audiences concerning the specifics of film production and aesthetic history. Cine-club-goers watching Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), for instance, would “hold the aesthetic secret of the film” once they knew the particulars of the film’s production (What Is Cinema v. 1, 109). He publicly discussed the function of cinematic elements in particular films, creating a climate for serious consideration of cinema aesthetics in postwar France (Andrew, 82-103).

Once spectators were well educated concerning the proper contexts for evaluating films, their expectations would change, and thus their emotional responses would change. They would respond along the lines that Bazin modeled: rejoicing over a cinematic triumph, saddened when expectations were disappointed.

Expectations are therefore central to Bazin’s concept of emotion. One can have different emotional responses to a film depending on the expectations one has. Since expectations are shaped by context, by changing the context you can change the emotional response. Bazin’s “school for spectators” not only attempted to alter audience’s aesthetic responses but also their emotional ones.

Sartre’s Emotional Consciousness

Not all successful narrative expectations serve Bazin’s goals for the cinema, however. The emotions elicited in Hitchcock films, for instance, arise out of particular narratively affective expectations, but Bazin condemns these states. What kinds of emotions serve Bazin’s goal for the cinema: to point us outward toward the world? Which lead us away from considering the world in its complexity and ambiguity? For the answer we must turn to the most prominent theorist of emotions and consciousness in Bazin’s day: Jean-Paul Sartre.

For Sartre, the emotions are a degraded form of consciousness that
we engage in when confronted with a difficult situation in the world. Emotions occur when our path is blocked and we cannot remove the obstacle through pragmatic action. Action is always the best option, but Sartre acknowledges that the world is recalcitrant to our desires. The external world for Sartre is a difficult place, forcing us to attempt what he calls “magical transformations” of that world: “When the paths traced out become too difficult, or when we see no path, we can no longer live in so urgent and difficult a world. All the ways are barred. However, we must act. So we try to change the world, that is, to live as if the connection between things and their potentialities were not ruled by deterministic processes, but by magic” (Emotions, 58-9). An emotion transforms the recalcitrant world into a situation that consciousness can handle through magical means.

By magic Sartre means that we are attempting to cross distance and remove the obstacle by means other than the physical (just as sleight-of-hand makes objects appear and disappear without any visible physical action). For example, if a wild animal charges at me and I faint in fear, Sartre argues that I am attempting to transform my situation magically. I want to eliminate the animal from my consciousness, but I can only do so by eliminating consciousness altogether: “What [consciousness] cannot endure in one way it tries to grasp in another by going to sleep, by approaching the consciousness of sleep, dream, and hysteria” (Emotions, 77). If it is impossible to find a solution in the objective world, I attempt a magical solution using my body and my consciousness: “in emotion it is the body which, directed by consciousness, changes its relations with the world in order that the world may change its qualities” (Emotions, 61).

The difficulty, of course, is that I am transforming my own consciousness, not the charging wild animal. Thus for Sartre the emotions are always an ineffective second choice to practical action. Emotions are a form of consciousness, but they are a degraded form that cause us to withdraw from the difficult world into an imaginary world of our own making.

For Sartre the imagination is a flight from reality, a de-realization of the world, and yet the imagination is crucial for the creation of consciousness, as he argues in The Psychology of Imagination. We cannot depend on the perception data of our senses alone to navigate through the world, even at the most basic level. Our senses can only perceive three sides of a cube; we must use imagination to fill in the gaps created by our limited perspective. A cube is necessarily an imaginary object that is given “being” or “presence” by the imagination when confronted with absences in our perception (Psychology, 9-10). Encounters with the world such as these give rise to consciousness.

Consciousness is not merely a container for such objects but instead is constituted by the interactions of perception and imagination when confronted by objects in the world. The spontaneous desire to know the
world and its objects in their completeness lies at the foundation of our humanness. This desire points us outward toward the world, and consciousness itself is constituted in the formation of a relationship between our desire and the world. Consciousness is a way of knowing the world, and without imagination to embellish the confrontations between desire and the surfaces of objects, we would only know a greatly truncated version of that world. As Judith Butler puts it, "the imagination is consciousness's mundane effort to surpass perspective" (109).

So imagination is central to all forms of consciousness, and imagination makes choices among actions possible. For Sartre all acts of consciousness, even emotions, are choices. Often we are not aware that we have chosen an action; such actions seem to be mere responses to circumstances in the outside world. But actions cannot be explained purely by as set of psychological causes. We engage in an act of bad faith, assuming that something external to consciousness can determine human behavior, thus denying our responsibility for our actions. If consciousness is an interaction between the exterior world and the person, then the person is responsible for their half of the interaction, for their choice from many possible imagined courses of action in a given situation.

For Sartre the emotions are a way of averting this responsibility. By placing the causal locus of emotions outside ourselves, by believing that an object in the world (e.g., a wild animal) gives us no choice of response, we deny the relational nature of consciousness and deny our responsibility for our emotional actions.

Sartre calls such consciousness (which attempts to place causes in the external world) prereflective. Prereflective consciousness is a kind of immediate self-awareness that has not yet developed into a more explicit self-knowledge. When consciousness considers its actions, it becomes what Sartre calls reflective consciousness. Reflective consciousness is aware of the choices one makes, instead of placing the locus of control in the outside world.

Reflection constitutes the ego, creating a positional object that can take responsibility for the consciousness's choices. The "I" discovered by reflective consciousness is not a transcendent, pre-existing self but is constituted by the act of reflecting on the spontaneous actions of pre-reflective consciousness. By positing a pseudo-self that is the source of those pre-reflective actions, consciousness creates an object capable of choice. Only through reflective consciousness, then, can one recognize one's freedom to make choices. Taking responsibility for one's actions in the world, then, requires an ego at the center of a consciousness that can imagine various alternative courses of action and that can reflect on those actions.

For Sartre emotions are necessarily a form of prereflective consciousness. Emotions appear to us to be caused by external objects in the
world, and they do not provoke us to the kind of reflection that could show that emotions are choices made by consciousness. We think that qualities reside in objects, not in ourselves; we think that objects are horrifying or appealing without awareness of the transformational work of consciousness on such objects in our imagination.

Such nonreflective consciousness de-realizes the world and does not encourage us to return to the world. Instead we tend to stay in the imaginary world created by the emotion, a childish world where magic rules when practical action is impossible: “the act of imagination is a magical one. It is an incantation destined to produce the object of one’s thought, the thing one desires, in a manner that one can take possession of it... In that act there is always something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take distance of difficulty into account” (Psychology, 177). Such nonreflective solutions to problems play at satisfying desire without encouraging us to revisit the recalcitrant world, acknowledge our responsibility for our actions, and seek better solutions. For Sartre emotions are a forceful but necessarily lesser way of being-in-the-world: “if emotion is a joke, it is a joke we believe in” (Emotions, 61). They are immature degradations of consciousness that provide imaginary transformations of the difficult external world.

Renoir vs. Hitchcock: Reflective and Nonreflective Emotions

Bazin similarly believes that great films are imaginative transformations of the world, and not merely slavish reproductions of reality. Just as Sartre believes that the world does not unilaterally force itself upon consciousness, Bazin does not believe that the real world simply impresses itself upon celluloid. Just as Sartre emphasizes the importance of the imagination in constituting consciousness, Bazin emphasizes the importance of the imaginative artist in creating the realist film.

Bazin is no simple realist; for instance, he argues that “realism in art can only be achieved in one way — through artifice (What Is Cinema v. 2, 26). The realism that audiences attribute to cinema (based on their ontological knowledge of the film medium) must be shaped through the perspective of a filmmaker appropriately oriented toward the real world. For Bazin the artist’s consciousness is central to transforming the world into an aesthetic object.

An auteur’s way of being-in-the-world shapes the film text. A filmmaker’s intentional stance toward objects can be read from the film text, showing whether the auteur reacts to the world with love, honesty, or cruelty. Bazin, in a romantic moment, says that “[p]oetry is but the active and creative form of love, its projection onto the world” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 74), and that such honest love for the world, expressed in a filmmaker’s work, can transcend all boundaries: “authentic and naive love scales the walls and penetrates the stronghold of ideologies and social theory” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 71).
The emotional consciousness of a filmmaker transforms the world into an act of imagination, and a great artist differs from a mediocre one not only aesthetically but also emotionally, in the intentional stance he/she takes toward the world. For Bazin, the love a director like De Sica has for his characters determines his cinematic style. De Sica's style is "primarily a way of feeling"; his love "radiates from the [characters] themselves. They are what they are, but lit from within by the tenderness he feels." De Sica is one of the directors whose "entire talent derives from the love they have for their subject, from their ultimate understanding of it" (What Is Cinema v. 2, 62-3). Bazin believes that "the cinema more than any other art is particularly bound up with love" (What Is Cinema v. 2, 72).

The counterbalancing emotion for love is cruelty, which has a "necessary and dialectic relationship to love" (What Is Cinema v. 2, 72), according to Bazin. Directors must not err by letting their love for their characters become excessive to the point of false optimism. Instead they must temper their love by being "cruel" to their characters as the world is cruel. Because of "the cruelty of creation" (Cinema of Cruelty, 56), a realistic filmmaker must not guard their characters from having bad things happen to them. A Renoir film must be "cruel sometimes, but only out of tenderness. Its cruelty is objective; it is nothing more than the acknowledgment of destinies at odds with happiness, the measure of a love without constraint and without illusion." (Renoir, 108). When artists truly love their creations, according to Bazin, they balance their love with cruelty, which keeps the work true to reality. Both emotional orientations are required simultaneously to produce a great film.

Bazin and Sartre are both aestheticians whose writings are more centrally concerned with the creative task of the artist than with the interpretive task of the audience, since a great artist's creative choices are always made by active and reflective consciousness. Audiences may watch a film in a purely nonreflective manner, simply responding to the narrative stimuli without acknowledging the choice of response they make, but filmmakers must actively choose the elements they include in their films. Such choices are aesthetic but they are also emotive. They not only select what objects in the world to include in the frame, but they also choose their affective stance toward that world, which is revealed in the finished film, according to Bazin.

Filmmakers are torn between two tendencies, which Bazin calls by several different names ("technical skill" vs. "spiritual value," (French Cinema, 44) "tears of melodrama" vs. "spiritual tears" (French Cinema, 67), or the "realistic" and "psychological" vs. the "spiritual" and the "aesthetic" (What Is Cinema v. 1, 11)), which I shall call the "dramatic" and the "aesthetic." Filmmakers who favor the "dramatic" tendency can effectively evoke emotional responses from spectators through their mastery of technical and narrative construction. They rely on established conventions that can reliably
elicit emotions from audiences, and many audiences continue to visit the
cinema because it so dependably generates emotional experiences. Other
filmmakers following the “aesthetic” tendency are more concerned with
expanding the language of cinema. These innovators provide a more
“spiritually” satisfying experience for their audiences, reaching the individual’s
soul. Both tendencies can elicit emotions, but Bazin believes that experiences
of the dramatic and aesthetic tendencies are qualitatively different: “It is not
the tears shed that prove the worth of a drama. What is important is their
spiritual salt. Margot will weep as she did at the previous week’s melodrama,
but she will be aware that her tears do not have the same taste, that they
have the salt of truth” (French Cinema, 67).

Bazin is overtly concerned with the aesthetic in his criticism. He
seeks to create a master narrative in which filmic texts further the evolution
of the language of cinema. But the filmmakers he values most are those like
Jean Renoir and Orson Welles who combine the two tendencies, who advance
the cinema’s aesthetic while simultaneously documenting the affective nature
of the world they’re filming. Welles’s style emerges because of a need to
create a new language, according to Bazin, but also because Welles pays
attention to details in the mise-en-scene “which have imposed themselves
on the author’s imagination by their affective power alone” (Welles, 67-8). In
a Renoir film “characters, objects, light, all must be arranged in the story like
colors in a drawing, without being directly subordinated to it (Renoir, 32).”
Renoir is important not only for the technical obstacles he overcomes in
making pioneering films but also for the mixture of love and cruelty, comedy
and bitterness in his films. A balance of the aesthetic and dramatic tendencies
is important to great filmmaking.

Bazin argues so forcefully concerning the aesthetic, however, that it
is easy to forget how central the other tendency is. He sometimes structures
his examples to emphasize the contributions of the aesthetic and to downplay
the dramatic contribution. For instance, he raves about the scene in Umberto
D (1952) that shows the details of the young woman waking up, holding it
up as an example of De Sica’s and Zavattini’s technique of showing “the
succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be
more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at
its very basis” (What Is Cinema v. 2, 81). He neglects to mention that this
scene is effective largely because the audience has just learned that this
woman is pregnant. Only with the underpinning of dramatic development
can this aesthetic choice be effective, although Bazin sometimes forgets to
acknowledge the contributions of our narrative expectations.

It is easier to see the dramatic and the aesthetic tendencies in
filmmakers who, unlike Renoir and Welles, do not combine them well.
Following the pursuit of the aesthetic tendency, a filmmaker can forget the
importance of the dramatic narrative. Bazin says that this happens in Visconti’s
La Terra Trema (1948). He situates the film in the larger narrative of the progress of Italian postwar cinema. The Italians had created a rich and diverse body of realistic texts, but Bazin wondered if they were doomed to repeat their earlier successes. Bazin praises La Terra Trema as a tour de force integration of the trends of documentary and aesthetic realism that "bears the burden of our hopes" for progress out of the "aesthetic impasse" (What Is Cinema v. 2, 45) of the Italian cinema. But Bazin's hopes are not fulfilled because La Terra Trema ignores the importance of drama and bores the public. Visconti forgets that drama is a primary pleasure for many audiences, revealing that the aesthetic cannot stand without a complementary emphasis on the drama. Bazin states, "The aesthetic of La Terra Trema must be applicable to dramatic ends if it is to be of service in the evolution of cinema" (What Is Cinema v. 2, 45). Because of his "disinclination to sacrifice anything to drama," Visconti creates a film that is aesthetically innovative but emotionally inaccessible, according to Bazin.

Other filmmakers forget the obligation to advance the cinema's aesthetic evolution, concentrating solely on evoking emotional responses in their audience. Hitchcock is the exemplar of this tendency for Bazin. Bazin frequently calls Hitchcock "the most clever man in movies" (Cinema of Cruelty, 123), a director whose talent is "dazzling." Even though Bazin thinks that Hitchcock's cinematic language is "the most splendid in the world" (Cinema of Cruelty, 110), he berates Hitchcock because he uses his technical expertise in ways that short circuit the cinema's capacity for returning us to the ambiguous world. Even when Hitchcock uses a technique that Bazin endorses (such as long takes in Rope (1948)), he does so in a way that is too morally and emotionally prescriptive: "Hitchcock's cutting [in Rope] in fact refers back to classical cutting. Each time we are struck by his effectiveness, it is because he has managed, at the cost of a thousand resolved hardships, to create the impression of shot and reverse shot or a close-up where it would have been easy to use a single take like everyone else" (Cinema of Cruelty, 114-115). Using bravura technique, Hitchcock battles against the tendency of the long take to capture the world's imprint; instead he manipulates the audience's focus toward a preselected moment of clearest emotional conflict. Therefore, his technically adept cinematic language does not serve the evolution of the medium: "His originality, or his audacity, actually consists in daring to reuse well-worn and traditional dramatic structures, although radically freshened—as much by his virtuosity as by subtle yet conclusive confusion of detail" (Cinema of Cruelty, 167). Hitchcock instead relies on established narrative structures with dependable emotional responses.

The cinema Bazin prefers, like Renoir's, pursues the aesthetic as well as dramatic emotions. But Bazin favors a particular kind of emotional appeal. Renoir, for instance, recognizes the importance of drama, but he downplays it, just giving enough for the plot to be understandable: "Drama, action... are
for him only pretexts for the essential, and the essential is everywhere in what is visible, everywhere in the very substance of the cinema. Of course, drama is necessary—that is what we go to the movies to see—but the story can get along easily by itself. It is sufficient to sketch just enough of it so that the audience has the satisfaction of understanding. That done, the real film remains to be made. . . .” (Renoir, 32). The key for Renoir’s realism is his powers of observation and imagination that supply crucial details, and these details allow him to move audiences “without recourse to dramatic conventions” (Renoir, 63). The apparatus of the narrative cinema is designed to propel the audience forward through the plot, and Bazin recognizes that this dramatic pleasure is “what we go to the movies to see.” By interrupting our dramatic expectations with unconventional detail, however, a Renoir film subtly alters the cinema’s structures. Renoir’s use of detail dialectically balances the forward-looking emotional expectations of the audience.

Note that this description of Renoir’s tactics (dramatic force balanced by specific detail) is not that different from the description of Hitchcock’s technique quoted earlier (dramatic structure freshened by subtle detail) in which Bazin cited his “daring to reuse well-worn and traditional dramatic structures, although radically freshened—as much by his virtuosity as by subtle yet conclusive confusion of detail” (CineJ1’za of Cruelty, 167). Why then is Renoir’s approach to cinematic emotions praised and Hitchcock’s not dissimilar approach criticized?

The difference lies in the kind of emotion Hitchcock elicits. In Bazin’s opinion the emotions delivered by a Hitchcock film clearly fall into what Sartre would call pre-reflective consciousness. We respond to the filmic text without being called to reflect on the experience: “Hitchcock carries us from the most sensitive nerve endings to the cerebral cortex. Through this channel he stimulates our intellect. The emotion, however, never goes beyond the cerebral sphere to the heart or, even more generally, enters the consciousness” (Cinema of Cruelty, 131). Bazin describes suspense, Hitchcock’s primary feeling tone and narrational organization, as an “a priori framework for narrative structure,” dictating what events will happen and when they will occur. Bazin admits that “[n]o one knows better than he how to lead his audience by the nose, making it experience the exact dose of anticipated emotion at just the right moment,” but he believes these emotional appeals do not reach the higher levels of consciousness (Cinema of Cruelty, 124). Instead of pointing us toward further consideration of the world, such films encourage us to stay within the limited confines of the diegesis Hitchcock creates. Unless a film calls for us to reflect on our emotional experiences, it will degrade our consciousness of the world, de-realizing its ambiguities and replacing them with a satisfying but hermetically sealed experience.

How does a filmmaker use emotion to create reflective consciousness? Sartre says little about how emotions can provide entry to such higher states.
Bazin, however, thinks that a film's emotional appeal can indeed produce reflection. In fact, for Bazin this kind of reflection is the highest aim of cinematic emotions.

Bazin argues that the deeper emotions do not come from confirming an audience's narrative expectations, as Hitchcock does with his "dazzling" but "well-worn" dramatic structures. If an outcome is obvious, we are prewarned against its affective power. If its appeal is not obvious, we feel it more. Bazin compares *The Bicycle Thief* to a propaganda film, suggesting that De Sica's film derives its power because its appeal is not stated so baldly or contrived so clearly (*What Is Cinema* v. 2, 51-53). He declares that we "share more fully in the feelings of a protagonist" (*What Is Cinema* v. 2, 36) if the camera is not subjective, overtly specifying its emotional address. Cinema, "the most immodest of the arts," must counterbalance its directness with "the maximum of modesty: for mask and disguise, in style, in subject matter, in make-up" (*What Is Cinema* v. 2, 138).

Of course all cinema cues the viewer concerning how to feel, but for Bazin the crucial difference is in how overt the cues are. If a filmmaker overtly dictates audience emotion, their emotions remain shallower, not reaching the higher levels of consciousness.

In Hitchcock there is no question that the outcome will confirm an audience's emotional expectations. *Shadow of a Doubt* (1944), for instance, "avoids none of the conventions that Americans love to recognize in the films they see" (*Cinema of Cruelty*, 103). According to Bazin, "The viewer no longer wonders what will happen — the conventions of the rhetoric guarantee it. He wonders how Hitchcock will get out of the situation" (*Cinema of Cruelty*, 168). This constant confirmation of expectations makes Bazin characterize Hitchcock's cinema as mechanical, comparing it to useless but gorgeous Rube Goldberg contraptions (*Cinema of Cruelty*, 171-2). In fact, "[l]ove or religious duty are for him only cogs and levers in his anguish-producing machine" (*Cinema of Cruelty*, 132). Bazin, who praises the cinema as a mechanical medium that can convey a human consciousness, berates the cinema when the filmmaker's consciousness is replaced by a machine. For Bazin the key to stimulating reflective consciousness is to thwart the mechanically predictable narrative expectation.

Obstructing the narrative calls upon viewers to consider the film and decide for themselves how to interpret the text. When expectations are violated, viewer must reflect on their own consciousness to determine how to feel. This is the essence of reflective consciousness, an active decision unlike most cinematic spectatorship which Bazin considers to be passive. To overturn the passivity of most cinematic viewing, a film must foreground the fact that emotions are chosen by the viewer, not demanded by the text. Instead of calling on the bad faith assumption that the text's dramatic narrative dictates an audience's affective reactions, films using deep focus and long
takes encourage viewers to sift through the various signifiers, determining which ones are most significant at a particular time. Most importantly, the viewer can become aware of their own willed personal choice in choosing to attend to different elements (What Is Cinema v. 1, 36) and by reflecting on their own emotional process, they can take responsibility for it.

Such a stance of active, reflective choice more greatly resembles that of the artist than that of the normal viewer. Bazin's artist-centered aesthetic gains power for the viewer by putting him/her in a position much like the artist's. Viewers should feel that they are presented with a complex situation that requires their active choosing to make emotional sense out of the many cues. In this way the active reflective consciousness of the viewer watching the complex film echoes the active reflective consciousness of the artist confronted with the ambiguous real world. Both must choose and reflect on their choices in order to make sense out of their situation. Both must remake what they see, transforming real/realistic perception through active attention and imagination into emotional consciousness. Bazin asserts that great filmmakers and great audiences alike must seek an open, honest way of being-in-the-world that allows them to reflect on the difficult and ambiguous nature of the real world.

This contemplation of the world sounds a great deal like the reflective state that Stanley Cavell advocates for film viewers. This is not particularly surprising since Cavell acknowledges that he wrote The World Viewed because he was inspired by Bazin's writings (xiii). But a brief comparison to Cavell will help us see better the role that emotions play in Bazin's conception of contemplation. Although we frequently reduce Bazin to his ontological pronouncements about film, Cavell gives us a glimpse of what a more specifically philosophical interrogation of ontology looks like. For Cavell, the viewer's "natural relation" to the movies for him gave rise to an impetus to philosophy (ix). He self-reflexively acknowledges that his philosophical writing in The World Viewed is prompted and provoked by the nature of the image. Cavell responds to the call of the image by doing philosophy, and it is a philosophical reflectiveness that he advocates and models, not that of the mystic.

Cavell, like Bazin and Sartre, recognizes that the world does not present itself to us unproblematically. He emphasizes the role that fantasy plays in our understanding of the world, that we cannot know the world apart from our fantasies that have imbued the world with meaning (102)—much like Sartre's notion of the imagination being central to consciousness. But Cavell lacks the assumption that such fantasies necessarily keep us from a fuller contemplation of the world. Fantasy is a given that the philosopher must examine, not a denigrated form of consciousness that lures us away from knowing the world better. Lacking both Sartre's negatively judgmental
understanding of the emotions and Bazin's faith in the positive possibilities of
the emotions, Cavell is free to endorse a wide range of cinematic devices as
helping the philosopher-viewer consider the world. He does not prefer long
takes over montage, and he explores the philosophical insights provided by
quite nonnaturalistic techniques such as freeze frames and slow motion (73,
133-134, 138-139). The ambiguity of the world, for Cavell, is not so fragile
that it can be removed by techniques such as montage (181). And so Cavell
is much more interested in modernist filmmakers because those filmmakers
reenact the kind of philosophical contemplation he envisions: a contemplation
of the nature of the medium itself, a reflective awareness of the ontology of
film. Unburdened by Bazin’s assumptions about the reflective possibilities of
certain emotions and the denigration of others, Cavell shows a more purely
ontological consideration of film with fewer overt prescriptions for how
filmmakers should recreate the world for us.

The difference between Bazin's optimism and Sartre's pessimism
concerning the possibility of reflective emotions lies in their different
conceptions of the "image" at the center of imaginative activity. In his writings
Sartre is primarily concerned with mental images which for him are not
representational in the usual sense. Sartre's images are relations between
consciousness and objects (Psychology, 8). They combine a kinesthetic and
affective orientation toward the object with cognitive knowledge about that
object. Images are fully constituted desire-object relations without the give
and take of real interactions. Unlike real world objects which are
interconnected in countless ways, mental images when examined reveal
nothing new because they consist only of what we put into them (Psychology,
11). They are necessarily simplified versions of real objects, generalized
facsimiles of external reality. The impoverished image never surprises,
therefore it protects one from the unwanted qualities of the real object
(Psychology, 209-12). Because of images' simplicity we are tempted to interact
with them instead of dealing with messier, more complicated reality, and
thus the imagination has a tendency to withdraw from the real world into a
magical universe of its own where it can unproblematically possess objects
and play at satisfying desire. Photographs have the same form and function
as mental images, according to Sartre, but they are composed of a different
material that is less generalized (Psychology, 25).

Bazin of course does not emphasize mental images but photographic
images, since he is constructing a theory of film and not of all imaginative
activity. Because of Bazin's beliefs about the ontology of the filmic image, he
asserts the possibility of such images provoking reflection, just as objects in
the real world do. According to Bazin, our knowledge about the mechanical
reproductive process of creating film images encourages us to view celluloid
images as if they bore the imprint of the real world with minimal human
interference. Our understanding of the nature of the film apparatus gives the
cinema a psychologically convincing illusion of reality. This realistic tendency of filmic imagery gives the cinematic medium its uniqueness, and Bazin’s aesthetics works to emphasize this unique quality.

Because audiences treat film images as if they bore tracings of reality, Bazin believes that such images can be used to provoke audiences to reflect on them. Such photographic images can point us out toward the real world, not inward toward nonreflective reactions to conventional narrative cues. In contrast to the impoverished nature of Sartre’s mental images, Bazin’s photographic images can be packed with ambiguity, which invites viewers to examine and contemplate them. If properly used by a filmmaker who balances the dramatic and the aesthetic tendencies, filmic images (according to Bazin) can provoke emotions which encourage reflection. Bazin’s beliefs about the ontology of film allows him to be optimistic about the possibility of reflective emotional consciousness in ways that Sartre could not be.

Bazin took from Sartre a basic understanding of the emotions and their role vis a vis imagination and consciousness. For Sartre emotions are necessarily a lesser form of consciousness, a magical transformation of the world that degrades one’s relation with that world. Bazin’s understanding of art as an imaginative transformation of the world by the filtering consciousness of the artist is rooted in Sartre’s theories. Bazin also shares Sartre’s valuation of reflective consciousness over prereflective consciousness. However, if Bazin agreed with Sartre that emotions almost never bring about reflection, then he would have to ban such emotion from the cinema, since for Bazin the highest calling of the cinema is to cause the viewer to reflect on his/her world. Bazin then differs from Sartre in that he feels much more strongly that emotions can bring about the desired reflective consciousness of the world. By thwarting viewer expectation, the central component of cinematic emotion for Bazin, the filmmaker opens up the possibility of reflection, emphasizing the viewer’s choices.

Of course all narrative interpretation is a matter of choosing and selecting, but Bazin argues that the cinema should emphasize that the viewer has this choice. Such a structure of narrative and emotive choices mirrors the ontological ambiguities of the real world. For Bazin it is certainly crucial that the real world is ambiguous, that the filmmaker respect this complexity, and that certain aesthetic options (like the long take) can more easily convey this property of the world. But Bazin also believes that cinematic ambiguity is necessarily a narrative and emotional construct created by violating dramatic expectations. Ambiguity is ontological and aesthetic, yes, but it is also narrative and emotional, pointing us outside the diegesis to a contemplation of the world.

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Reflecting the Image: Sartrean Emotions in the Writings of Andre Bazin

Notes

2 I have not been able to find direct evidence of Sartre’s influence on Bazin, although they certainly traveled in the same French intellectual circles. It seems inconceivable that Bazin would not be familiar with the arguments of the most famous French intellectual of the first half of the 20th century. This is particularly true considering that Sartre himself took a leading interest in the very area that Bazin championed (the cinema), and Bazin cites Sartre’s film reviews in his own work (Welles, 81). Though Bazin does not cite Sartre as informing his thinking on the imagination and the emotions, it is hard to imagine a leading French intellectual like Bazin talking about those subjects without being aware of Sartre’s widely influential works on those subjects. Although there is no “smoking gun” in this essay, I believe that the common assumptions I articulate make a strong case for Sartre’s influence.

References


