

Sartre/Cinema: Spectator/Art That Is Not One

Robert Harvey

Cinema Journal, Vol. 30, No. 3. (Spring, 1991), pp. 43-59.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0009-7101%28199121%2930%3A3%3C43%3ASSTINO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

Cinema Journal is currently published by University of Texas Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/texas.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Sartre/Cinema: Spectator/Art That Is Not One

by Robert Harvey

Cinematic spectatorship and its relation to questions of gender has been the focus of numerous articles and theoretical projects since the early 1970s.¹ Laura Mulvey's 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"² "first spelled out the implications of Lacanian-Althusserian models of spectatorship (Metz, Baudry) for a critique of patriarchal cinema."³ Her original argument is well-known: with predictable success, commercial filmmakers lure spectators into darkened rooms with the implicit promise of satisfying innate scopophilic desires of either a voyeuristic or a fetishistic order. White, middle-class, male and heterosexual, Mulvey's implied spectator views films produced in Hollywood's classical era of film narrative that, according to Roland Barthes, systematically reproduce the Oedipal configuration relegating women to the status of object.

Mulvey's first theoretization of cinematic reception was limited by its preoccupation with a male gaze embedded in a period yet untouched by feminist critiques of society and culture. Her "Afterthoughts" in 1981 were meant to rectify this limitation by circumscribing the female spectator's reaction to film.⁴ As in Freud's theories on femininity, Mulvey considered the female spectator as oscillating between the two equally unacceptable alternatives of regressive masculinization through identification with a male hero (transvestism) or masochistically imagining herself in a conventional female position, both of which perpetuate the patriarchal economy of images and looking.

Theories of spectatorship and alternate film forms practiced now for more than a decade elude stable definition.⁵ Far from producing answers and inviting closure, questions of spectatorship and its relation to gender have proven more ambiguous than previously thought. While many feminist film critics remain in general agreement with Mulvey, the reduction of all moviegoing pleasure to voyeuristic, fetishistic, or masochistic scopophilia — the inevitable masculinization or feminization of the film spectator — seems far too limiting. Feminist film critics no longer take for granted that to experience visual pleasure implies subservience to patriarchal values through direct or displaced identifications. Judith Mayne suggests as much in a rhetorical question she posed in 1981: "If women cast a cinematic gaze inside rooms, does this necessarily entail an identification with the entire system of cinematic voyeurism?"⁶ If women are to continue to participate as film spectators, then it is urgent to formulate the evolution of a newly oriented spectatorship that would not feed repressive economies of perception. Mary Ann Doane has succinctly expressed the problem by asserting that "feminist

Robert Harvey is an assistant professor of French at SUNY-Stony Brook. His book on Sartre, paternity, and ethics is forthcoming.

© 1991 Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

film theory has convincingly demonstrated the extent to which the woman in the cinema is imaged as deficient or lacking in her 'object-hood.' But it is becoming increasingly evident that the construction of her 'subject-hood' poses difficulties as well."⁷ Miriam Hansen goes as far as to call for a "redemption of scopophilia" in order to define a female spectatorship that could somehow prevent the conceptual reduction of an unrepressive, ambivalent, and reciprocal way of looking to "voyeurism, fetishism and . . . the regime of castration."⁸ Teresa de Lauretis suggests, finally, that freeing spectatorship from dominant ideological structures may require the development of a type of counter-cinema that would "address its spectator as a woman, regardless of the gender of the viewers."⁹

Figuring out how spectators create meaning out of an artwork for the purpose of revolutionizing structures of looking was not entirely an innovation of the 1970s. Siegfried Kracauer's early writings about audience reaction to the movies are an integral part of his critique of the effects of popular culture on political, social, and ethical relations. It is also useful to examine early records that have been kept of experiences of film reception, especially since they approximately coincide with budding theories of spectatorship. An example of such a record is that of Jean-Paul Sartre. If Hansen chose to study Rudolph Valentino because as "a male erotic object [he is] a figure of overdetermination, an unstable composite figure that connotes [in Teresa de Lauretis's words] 'the simultaneous presence of two positionalities of desire,'"¹⁰ it is for the purpose of promoting similar ambiguities in desire and pleasure provoked by cinematic reception that I have chosen Sartre as a case for investigating the situation of the receiver of cinema and chosen Kracauer's ideas as the theoretical backdrop.¹¹

Why Sartre of all people? How could Sartre, who cultivated the tough, defensive macho style of writing commonplace in Western fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, be construed as a sensitive cinephile, as a possible model of some future spectator? While finding inspiration in the narrative techniques of Dos Passos and Hemingway, Sartre also grafted their demeaning attitudes toward women to his writings. Even his philosophical categories are tainted by the all-too-familiar belief in a hierarchical difference between genders.¹² Writing about "the possible lessons that Sartre's Freud scenario encourages us to draw about the fate of creativity in highly capitalized industries such as the cinema," Dana Polan, tempering his admiration for Sartre's sensitivity for seeing the sexual politics in psychoanalysis, cautions against drawing the conclusion "that the answer to a dominant system is the erection of a strong man (the resistant and rebellious Freud, the resistant and rebellious Sartre) into a Romantic, heroic figure able to rise above the demands of the world in an act of supreme transcendence."¹³ The metaphors Sartre's thought inspires in his commentators are unambiguously phallic.

Yet Sartre's machismo seems suspended when he talks about the movies. The effects of cinema on Sartre are described in fascinating detail first by Simone de Beauvoir in *La Force de l'âge* (1960), then by Sartre himself in *Les Mots* (1964). Sartre's spectatorial experience as circumscribed by these two biographical

contexts unexpectedly reveals elements of a mode of looking rather different from what we might infer from his writings on the medium. Whether reflecting critically on film or describing his experience as spectator, Sartre is far more ambivalent about his patriarchally defined maleness than he is in any other of his discourses.¹⁴ As I have interpreted these accounts, the exalted level of pleasure he attains in his moviegoing experiences derives from a propensity for occupying several supposedly incompatible spectatorial positions at the same time. Rather than confirm recent theories of spectatorship based on sexual difference,¹⁵ the case of Sartre tends to collapse the incompatibilities either between divergent female reactions in regard to narrative film or between a male and a female form of spectatorship.

In *Les Mots*, Sartre recounts how during his childhood he would frequently head off to the movies with his youthful widowed mother, Anne-Marie. Later in his life, as Simone de Beauvoir tells us, Sartre (who continued to live with his mother until her death in 1969) chose Beauvoir to accompany him in all his excursions into the cultural sphere. These two written accounts of cinematic interludes, shared with the two most important women in Sartre's life, reveal moments of crucially intimate sensorial and emotional intensity that on the surface seem incompatible. By the title of my essay, after Luce Irigaray's *This sex which is not one*, I am proposing that there is not *one* Sartre at the cinema and that consequently his cinematic spectatorship cannot be closed off by gendered definitions of spectatorship.¹⁶

Sartre is neither the perpetrator of an objectifying gaze nor the subject of a passive identification with the object of that gaze that to some has seemed the only option open to the female spectator. Sartre as spectator is never *one*, nor is he ever alone in the darkened room. Christian Metz's claim that "in a certain sense one is always alone at the cinema"¹⁷ was perhaps not meant literally, but we must at least now ask how Sartre *at* the movies differs from Sartre *away* from the movies and how that difference might tell us more about the effect of cinema on the perceiving subject in general.

In 1931, at a lycée graduation ceremony in Le Havre, Sartre delivered a speech in which he took the somewhat audacious position of conferring the status of *art* upon cinematography.¹⁸ Although in cosmopolitan Europe the cinema was gradually being endorsed as a new art medium, to provincial secondary school administrators and their bourgeois constituents the movies still seemed little more than a vulgar source of distraction whose annoying survival could only be attributed to the base preferences of the culturally deprived sectors of society: women, workers, children. At a time when movie houses were still being compared by parents to dens of iniquity, Sartre, though not yet a political propagandist, could be found promoting the notion that the cinematic institution had high pedagogical potential (the graduation speech was published in 1950 under the title "The Cinema is Not a Bad School"). In Sartre's earliest works about the

cinema we find him in a polemical stance, proclaiming the cinema to be a focal point of art and defying those who say it is not one.

Thirty years later, when *La Force de l'âge* appeared, a precise spectatorial incident that may have informed Sartre's call for a sort of cinematic didactics was brought to light. Sartre and Beauvoir's compulsion to explain everything to each other transcended their legendary intimate relationship, structuring the manner in which they chose to function as cinematic spectators. "We didn't just go to the movies for diversion," Beauvoir writes, "We went with the same seriousness of purpose as that of today's young devotees when they visit the cinemathèque."¹⁹ What fueled Beauvoir and Sartre's drive to see movies was not a yearning to be vacuously entertained, to be anesthetized from some tedious worker's existence (which they didn't have) as much as the conviction that, by subjecting each film to an exhaustive critique, they were fulfilling a mission and supporting the yet denigrated art form.

This politics of movie-going is occasioned by what Roland Barthes called "a very precise cultural quest: that of a chosen, desired, sought-after film: the object of true premeditation."²⁰ But however fortuitous Barthes might consider his own act of entering the cinema, under the intensely critical gaze of the dynamic existentialist duo, all chance was eliminated. Metz terms this mode of consciousness "professional viewing," explaining that when "a film critic assumes a mode of maximal vigilance, a mode of work, that film analyst's position is outside the institution by virtue of this activity."²¹ Even while viewing the film, Sartre and Beauvoir are not altogether *in* the cinema because although some degree of affective investment may be directed toward the screened narrative, their professionally conditioned minds are already oriented toward some café where, in an hour or so, they will dissect the work of art with the relish of film critics constructing their metanarratives. Sartre at the cinema with Beauvoir is a Sartre *on* the cinema, one who masters and critiques—that same Sartre who invited provincial high school students to take sides in the polemic raging over cinema's status as art form, the Sartre who will eventually dabble in film criticism.²²

Beauvoir and Sartre align their cinematic experiences in parallel. Their separate gazes are coordinated in a common activity of intense contemplation toward the goal of critical analysis. In their "attempt to take a dominant form of culture and rework it in democratic directions,"²³ they *concentrate* on the screened filmic narration, evincing one of the aesthetic tendencies or perceptual skills that Walter Benjamin claimed was receding since the advent of modernity along with the auratic quality of the work of art.²⁴ The mental exertion required for this undistracted concentration on the screened work itself is, according to Metz, inversely proportional to the spectator's "presence" inside the institution.²⁵ The ambiance within the screening room is organized by a dominant culture intent on creating distraction for profit. In order to concentrate on the artwork, then, the professional spectator must strive consciously to isolate him/herself and ignore disturbances within the enclosed viewing space. Conversely, Metz says,

an entirely *other* and much more prevalent spectatorship thrives in which leisure dominates over work. In *this* economy of look and location, the *extensive* spectator's gaze, more "distracted" than that of the film analyst on what constitutes a veritable "worksite," paradoxically allows that subject's conscience to dwell and function *inside* the cinematic institution. Taking inspiration from Cocteau's famous phrase that watching a movie is like dreaming with one's eyes open, Metz describes this distracted spectatorship as fitting somewhere between the oneiric state and that of day-dreaming: a state stripped nevertheless of the satisfaction that dreams afford since the moviegoer is, by definition, never fully asleep. Barthes described his own mode of consciousness prior to leaving the cinema as that of an "availability" or a "vacantness" not unlike the disposition for hypnosis.

Coupled with the didactic import of Sartre's 1931 speech, springing from professional viewing, the extensive or distracted cinematic experience that Metz and Barthes have described also informs Sartre's title "The Cinema is Not a Bad School." The emphasis in this title is neither on filmic flow nor on a space where didactic narrative requiring concentration is alone disseminated. A school can also be a place where any number of ancillary and distracting performances occur: Pierre snaps a rubberband-projected paper clip off the blackboard, a flock of deep-blue sea gulls wings its way past the window, etc. In order to accommodate such sensory input, Christa Karpenstein imagines "an unrestrained scopic drive, a *swerving and sliding gaze* which disregards the meanings and messages of signs and images that socially determine the subject, a gaze that defies the limitations and fixations of the merely visible."²⁶ The cinema is a didactic space, argued Sartre, a school whose information the student must collect both through distraction and concentration. By bringing out the characteristics of these two types of learning based on a theory of spectatorship whose diverse aspects function simultaneously in Sartre, we may also come to understand how they might coexist and interact in any viewing subject regardless of gender.

An elaborate contribution to the nearly absent record of early spectatorship over which Thomas Elsaesser has expressed regret²⁷ can be found in *Les Mots* where Sartre describes how, on rainy days in the years just before World War I, he and his mother would sneak away from Karl Schweitzer (Sartre's grandfather and, following the premature death of Sartre's father, the paterfamilias) to go to the movies.²⁸ The textual position of this richly detailed episode in the autobiographical work is crucial: Sartre recounts his youthful moviegoing with his mother just as the reader nears the rhetorical hinge between the two parts composing *Les Mots*, entitled "Reading" and "Writing." It is thus the last anecdote before Sartre's putative decision to change the valence of his entire existence from "passivity" to "activity," from the ingurgitation (reading) to the dissemination (writing) of words, from avowed femininity to the defensive masculinity described earlier. The various levels of this conversion are emblemized by the shearing of Poulou's long hair by the patriarch—the event that precipitates the discovery of Sartre's ugliness. Describing moviegoing is a pause in the music of this finely

composed piece of Sartrean prose, a moment's silence in the torrent of Sartrean logorrhea.

Inspired by the objectifying professional viewing that he practiced in tandem with Beauvoir, Sartre boldly told provincial lycée students that they should go often to the cinema because it was not a bad place to learn a thing or two. Twenty years earlier, at the movies with *maman*, suddenly shaken from his quasi-dream state by an abrupt intermission in the program and dazzled by house lights, young Sartre asked himself, "Where am I? In a school?"²⁹ A bare instant before, nestled in pre-Oedipal coziness next to Anne-Marie in the darkened hall where all is motion, emotion and perception, little Poulou had been supremely oblivious to the specificity of his location.

Might we not just as easily call it *her* location? For the sacred ceremony of movie-going with Anne-Marie is that of a very different ideal couple from the strictly gendered "popes [*le pape et la papesse*] of existentialism." Josette Pacaly, in her exhaustive psychocritical study of Sartre's *oeuvre*, has stated that entering the cinema phantasmatically fulfills Sartre's wish to return to foetal fusion with his mother.³⁰ As the only son of a young widow, Sartre, by his own account, was from birth virtually inseparable from Anne-Marie. Pacaly likens this desire to prolong post-partem inseparability to incestuous fixation, and indeed certain symptoms of what Freud qualifies as "disorder" in "The Psychology of Love" (1912) apply to Sartre. Poulou considered Anne-Marie more a sister than a mother. He fancied himself and Anne-Marie as being the same age. She had wanted to give birth to a daughter, but foiled by the inexorability of genetics, she decided to make do with Poulou, seeing to it "that [he] have the sex of angels—indeterminate, and a bit on the feminine side."³¹ Poulou sported long locks until his grandfather, disgusted that Anne-Marie was making a sissy out of the child, had them shorn. Poulou and Anne-Marie slept in the same room, in twin beds. "We constituted but one single girl," Sartre confesses.³²

However, Sartre's psychic disposition at age seven upon entering the cinema is more complex and potentially useful to spectator theory than incestuous longing. It would be reductive, for example, to conclude that Sartre was "feminized" by his mother and that his mode of spectatorship was correspondingly "feminine." Nor was it "masculine." Perhaps it was "pre-Oedipal." Certainly it was polymorphous in its slippages and ambivalence. And far from naive, I think Sartre's spectatorship was more sophisticated than any "gender-specific" definitions, and that he succeeded in retaining some of this oscillating perceptivity, carrying it over into his adulthood.

In young Sartre, the relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object in the game of captivation that unites these two elements in the economy of spectatorship is just as ambiguous as Poulou's sense of gender in those early moviegoing days. Did Poulou possess the cinema or did the cinema possess him? "This new art belonged to me as it belonged to everyone."³³ Sartre's praise in the 1931 speech for the inherent democracy of the cinematic institution can be interpreted along Freudian lines: the "art" of cinema and the place where

it is exhibited are indistinguishable from my mother, hence I possess my mother and so does everyone else. Freud writes in "The Tendency to Debasement in Love" (1912) that in trying to bridge the gulf between the two currents in love of affection and sensuality, a boy is willing to "degrade the mother to the level of prostitute." By "debasement of his mother," asserts Freud, the boy acquires her phantasmatically as an object of sensuality.³⁴

In Sartre's perceptual economy, the cinema also possesses *him* to a degree. Before Poulou's conversion to what Sartre, the adult, considers the "masculine" activity of writing,³⁵ he was still fixated in a stage where he flowed with the images, stories, and words of others (reading and listening being his principal intellectual activities). His receptivity to cinematic performance as an undifferentiated pool of pleasure was similarly uninhibited. Sartre's reminiscence of movies with *maman* invites us to move along with the flow, not of any specific *filmic* narrative but of his own *written* narrative of a total *cinematic* experience with its emphasis on movement. Here is the hermetically closed experience that the young "girlish" boy enjoyed repeating in the intimate company of his maidenly mother:

The spectacle was under way. Stumbling, we followed the usherette. I felt sneaky. Above our heads, a beam of white light, in which one could see dust and smoke dancing, traversed the room. A piano whinnied. Violet pears gleamed from the wall. The varnish-like smell of a disinfectant choked me. The odor and fruits of this populated night blended within me: I ate the emergency lamps, I filled myself with their acidulous taste. I scraped my back against knees, I sat down on a squeaky chair and my mother slid a folded blanket under my buttocks to raise me up. Finally, I looked at the screen. I discovered a fluorescent chalk, flashing landscapes streaked by downpours. It was always raining—even in full sunlight, even inside apartments. Sometimes a flaming asteroid would traverse a baroness's sitting room without her appearing the least surprised. I loved that rain, that restless twitching that worked at the wall. The pianist struck up the overture of "Fingals Höhle" and everyone understood that the villain would appear: the baroness would be crazed with fear. But her beautiful charcoaled face gave way to a purple sign: "End of Part One." It was a rush disintoxication—the light. Where was I? In a school? Some administrative office? Not the least ornamentation: rows of flap-seats exposing their springs below, walls daubed in ochre, flooring littered with cigarette butts and spit. Thick noises filled the room. Language was being reinvented. The usherette hawked sour drops, my mother bought some, I put them into my mouth, sucking the emergency lamps.³⁶

Multiple layers of rereading of this passage are warranted: in presenting the archaeology of his own response to the cinema, Sartre stylistically mimics the choppiness of the silent movie apparatus; the program of the movie-house described contains the structure of the autobiography *en abyme* ("End of Part One"); etc. However, I will limit my analysis to three points. First, the narrative of the specific film in question is of remarkably small importance. While it is true that a somewhat generic baroness is mentioned, she seems to have little to do with any particular plot and mainly lends comic support to Sartre's greater

fascination with the material defects in the film (blotches produced by silver nitrate deterioration). Next, there is a plethoric mobilization of the young boy's senses. Certainly vision plays a central role even though Poulou more or less ignores the narrative flow. His attention is drawn from the dancing particles he notices in the projector beam to the downpour of "asteroids" upon the flashing and flickering chalk-white landscapes. We are reminded of Mulvey's description of how "the illusion of voyeuristic separation" gets created by the cinematic apparatus, except that Poulou's relationship with the projected film is hardly what one could consider voyeuristic.³⁷ The scene culminates when the blinding light of floodlamps plunges him into the filthy reality of the cinematic grotto. And although we are in the silent era, Sartre is moved by the equine sounds of the piano and by musical scores that he precisely identifies.

Smell, touch, and taste are far more important in Sartre's youthful movie-going experience than sight. These are the senses of proximity and, logically, those least associated with the cinematic experience. Poulou's nose is assaulted by tobacco smoke and disinfectant, his back brushes against the knees of strangers and his buttocks settle into the cozy warmth of a blanket his mother has carefully folded for him. Taste, above all, marshals all the other senses and blends them into one. Clearly it is upon the emergency lamps—those "violet pears"—that Poulou's attention is focussed. The cinema's allure is made tangible (edible to be precise) by the violet light bulbs for which the institution provides an immediately consumable replica in the form of little English sour drops enabling him to ingest the whole cinema. If black is for Barthes the color of a diffused and modern eroticism,³⁸ for Sartre that color is unmistakably violet.

Astounding passages throughout Sartre's work shed yet more light on the color violet and its relation to Sartrean eroticism. Several of these are to be found in *La Nausée*, a humid text from beginning to end, set in the drizzly and muddy burg of Bouville. Roquentin's diary contains a bizarre account of the "refusal" of a pair of mauve suspenders to show themselves as unmistakably violet and is the hallucinatory translation of his erotic anticipation followed by disappointment.³⁹ Later Roquentin spends a rainy afternoon mocking the vain attempts of Bouville's staid inhabitants to distract themselves at the movies, finishing his tough day with a lurid sexual encounter, in violet, with the cashier of the Café Mably.⁴⁰ In "L'Enfance d'un chef," one of the short stories in *Le Mur*, a sobbing little Lucien Fleurier snuggles against his mother's bosom. The moving car they are traveling in whitens at regular intervals from the light of the street lamps passed. "Lucien blinked his eyes and the violets in maman's corsage leapt from the shadows and Lucien smelled their odor."⁴¹

This last scene is reminiscent and perhaps even inspired by Proust's description of Swann brushing catlily pollen from Odette's breasts or Emma and Frédéric's burlesque carriage scene in *Madame Bovary*. But its links to Sartre's description of himself as a young boy at the movies with his mother are obvious. Virtually all appearances of mauve or violet objects in Sartre's work, as Josette Pacaly has pointed out, are associated with sexual desire considered deviant by

adults. These associations spring from his recollection of repeated visits to the movies amalgamated into the single passage quoted above—visits to the darkened room that constituted a euphoric symphony of the senses. Why should Poulou have cared what film was playing?—The experience with maman both absorbed and distracted him: a game causing great delight.

Only the small, dingy neighborhood cinemas induce this total sensorial reaction combining absorption and distraction. Occasionally, though, Anne-Marie and Poulou venture to the Right Bank and its gaudy boulevard movie palaces where little Sartre's receptivity to spectacle has to make major adjustments.⁴² It is ironic that in neighborhood cinemas, Sartre avails himself jubilantly to any number of fortuitous distractions, while in the big picture palaces, *designed* to distract the audience with mock theater ornamentations, Sartre only remembers losing patience: "the gilding spoiled my pleasure." An orchestra, the red velvet curtains and the golden tassels Sartre recalls add up to a veritable conspiracy of distraction prompting the young moviegoer to focus with a vengeance on the filmic narrative by sitting as close to the screen as possible. Here (not in the neighborhood cinemas), he can actually remember the titles of the specific films he viewed.⁴³

The tinge of eroticism associated with the sensation of shock [*Chockerlebnis*] as Walter Benjamin describes it is quite similar to Poulou's flitting retinal response to film defects.⁴⁴ But what are we to make of the concentration the boy was able to muster in other circumstances? The early writings of Siegfried Kracauer on cinematic spectatorship are most helpful in examining Sartre's seemingly incommensurable experiences at the movies. Kracauer's interest in women as consumers of mass culture in the 1920s can be regarded as an early attempt to construct a theory of mutual and reciprocal spectatorship that embraces visual pleasure while holding that pleasure at a theoretical distance from perversions that objectify and vilify women. Kracauer wrote about the viewing experience in numerous newspaper articles collected now in *Das Ornament de Masse*.⁴⁵ Two of these articles, "Kult der Zerstreung" (1926) and "Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino" (1928) are particularly pertinent to Sartre's case.

What Kracauer calls distraction occurs, paradoxically, when "the audience's attention becomes rivetted to the surface splendor" of Berlin's picture palaces [*Lichtspielhäuser*]:

Surface splendor (or surface phenomena) is a total artwork of effects which subordinates the actual film to a position of negligible importance. It assaults every one of the senses using every possible means. Spotlights shower their beams into the auditorium, sprinkling across festive drapes or rippling through colorful growth-like fixtures. The orchestra asserts itself as an independent power, its acoustic production buttressed by the responsory of the lighting. Every emotion is accorded its own acoustic expression, its color value in the spectrum—an optical and acoustic kaleidoscope . . . finally the white surface descends and the events of the three-dimensional stage imperceptibly blend into two-dimensional illusions.⁴⁶

As in Sartre's description in *Les Mots*, the contrast between light and dark

takes center stage here. As before, the titillation of all senses is underscored. Kracauer applauds these total spectacles because they "convey in a precise and undisguised manner to thousands of eyes and ears the *disorder* of society—this is precisely what enables such shows to evoke and maintain that tension which must precede the inevitable and radical change."⁴⁷ Whether produced for profit by dominant culture or not, distraction receives praise from Kracauer for its revolutionary potential just as Sartre praises the cinema for its didactic power. Like the voyeuristic and fetishistic lure of mainstream films for male spectators, "distraction," as Kracauer uses the term, may describe how workers get seduced through the cinema's doors by the promise of a temporary amnesia from their workaday alienation. However, the "distraction" provoked by surface phenomena inside movie palaces is also the aesthetic correlate of social alienation. And it is this *aesthetic* dimension that lends distraction its positive force. Just as Berliners are conditioned by the repetitive gestures of work, "[they] are addicted to distraction." Stressing that the audience's attention *must* become rivetted to the peripheral "so that they will not sink into the abyss," Kracauer calls "the refractions of the spotlights and the musical accompaniment *life-buoys*" for the bizarre reason that "they keep the spectator above water."⁴⁸ This express fear of sinking into a watery abyss, oddly similar to Freud's aversion to being overcome by what he termed the "oceanic feeling,"⁴⁹ may be attributed to a spectatorship that in "Cult of Distraction" Kracauer insists has gone extinct and is therefore no longer available as a spectatorial option.

Abyssal spectatorship abandons surface phenomena for the depths of plot, shuns the external, and is a "threat to truth rather than sincere." Nevertheless, although obsolete, the "*glue of sentimentality*" [*der Kitt des Sentimentalität*] persists, to Kracauer's annoyance. Kracauer, I think, demonstrates an even greater sensitivity to the affective potential in the cinematic experience than Benjamin: although he condemns the restoration of "artistic unity" in the cinema as reactionary, he condones the "glue of sentimentality" as the subjective residue of the need for such unity. The concern for a more liberating, shifting, and pleasurable spectatorship appears in a recent statement by Patrice Petro where she entertains the hypothesis that "early German film theory when combined with a feminist perspective, may provide a more precisely social and historical explanation for the construction of subjectivity and identification in film and television viewing as at once dispersed and distracted while at the same time intensely preoccupied and absorbed."⁵⁰

In the "Little Shopgirls" article, Kracauer dwells more ponderously (though not more considerably) on the sticky subject of sentimentality. The "stupid little girls" Kracauer mocks identify with victims in melodramas that the critic cannot refrain from labeling low-brow tragedies. Despite this somewhat elitist sarcasm, Kracauer demonstrates an awareness of the need to account for and articulate this "other" spectatorship. Along with the increasing presence of women at the modern industrial workplace came their desire to participate collectively in leisure activities outside the home. One of the first places that this desire could be

satisfied was the movie theater. While in "Cult" Kracauer implied that the only spectatorship possible, indeed the only one with the potential for revolutionizing a moribund culture and society, was the oxymoronic concept of a distracted attentiveness, he attributes an absorbed and concentrated gaze thriving with the "little shopgirls." And although he scoffs at the maudlin reaction resulting from feminine film contemplation, the mere existence of these articles attests to his uneasy fascination with this *other* spectator. It is as if her experience were uncannily familiar to him. If Adorno's assessment of him is correct, this uneasiness veils certain traits inherent in Kracauer's own contemplative impulses that he felt ashamed to reveal: "He himself," writes Adorno, "to some extent shares the naive visual pleasure of the moviegoer: even the little shopgirls who amuse him manifest something of his own reaction to film." Heide Schlüppmann, commenting on this statement, says "Kracauer's reflections on the effect of film are more complicated than Adorno's remarks imply."⁵¹ It is true that the qualifier "naive" reveals the extent to which Adorno abides by simplistic binary oppositions sustaining patriarchal ideology but his observation at the same time corroborates the hypothesis that Kracauer was highly ambivalent—one might say *androgynous*—on the question of spectatorship.⁵²

Patrice Petro has recently argued that "the female spectator's absorbed attention in the cinema suggest that women were constituted differently than men in relation to the image and to structures of looking."⁵³ While this may go a bit far in speculating about gender-specific *constitutional* differences, it may be worth testing the paradoxical notion that women, so often considered naive, passive spectators, were involved, intensive, concentrated viewers of the new art medium.⁵⁴ It would imply that a contemplative aesthetic whose loss Heidegger certainly and Benjamin more ambivalently deplored remained the domain of feminine perceptual activity or at least became so once they gained access to a cultural space within which they could return the look.⁵⁵

So which spectatorship informs "Sartre at the movies"? At the local cinema, Sartre is an especially distracted member of the audience: the dispersion of his attention is caused not by gaudy ornamentations and effects, but by the elements of an obscure maternal ambience⁵⁶—the film is only one of many accessories promoting distraction (although it is the only one produced by the institution). At the big picture palaces Poulou resists succumbing to the attraction of peripheral phenomena.⁵⁷ By sitting inordinately close to the screen, he overcomes the bother of gilt and glitter and glues himself in rapt contemplation to the filmic imagery, whether organized in narrative form or not.

Having to sit in a row where one is nearly engulfed by the screened image and the musical accompaniment, Sartre seems to lose any shred of autonomy that as perceiver he might have left. Once transfixed, he begins to imagine himself, as Kracauer predicts in the case of the "little shopgirls," as a character in the film. From what is known of young Sartre's reading regimen, we might expect him to identify with a dashing male savior. Instead, in a doubly impossible

identification, he communes affectively with a young, teary-eyed widow. But Poulou can no more be the widow in the movie than he can his widowed mother sitting beside him and whom he obviously believes the film character to represent. Nevertheless, he vicariously experiences her sorrow: "that young widow who cried on the screen *was not me*, yet she and I [just like he and Anne-Marie] had but one soul—Chopin's funeral march. Nothing more was needed for *her* tears to moisten *my* eyes."⁵⁸ This impossibility of identity with the mother becomes thwarted filmic identification, and it is at this precise moment in the text that Sartre places the account of how his grandfather cut his hair. Only the conjunction of concentration and distraction would have inspired such a poignant description of that crisis.

"The film is less certain than the dream," writes Metz "as an hallucinatory accomplishment of desire."⁵⁹ The phantasm of becoming total being, which is at the heart of the Sartrean theory of desire, was given fullest expression in the infamous final chapter of *Being and Nothingness*.⁶⁰ A decidedly male subject approached plenitude of being through a bizarre "feminization." In an existential initiation rite where Pierre must allow himself, at the risk of death, to become glued in a "viscous" medium while maintaining a certain detached (unglued) male state, Sartre allows his philosophical subject to attain ontological nirvana.⁶¹ Similarly, as a cinematic spectator with his mother, Sartre embraced all of the senses as well as the experiences of both sexes. Or, formulating once again my question(ing) of gender, was Sartre's perhaps the experience of neither sex—what Derrida called Heidegger's neutralization of sexual duality?⁶²

"With its true-to-life images and sounds, the narrative film helps feed the phantasmic *flux* of the subject and *irrigate* the figures of his desire," writes Metz,⁶³ leading back to Irigaray and my title and permitting me to stress once again how intimately images of liquid and the desire for totality merge for Sartre in a spectatorial practice acquired in the silent era of film: "The cinema was a suspicious apparition that I loved perversely for what it still lacked. That flowing, that sliding of figures on the screen was everything; it was nothing; it was everything reduced to nothing. Solids had been stripped of a mass that encumbered *me* to the quick and my young idealism took great pleasure in this infinite contraction."⁶⁴ The flow of perceptual streaming crescendoes in chase scenes on horseback accompanied by the paradigmatic score of Berlioz's "Course à l'abîme." Paroxysmic motion on the screen renders imminent Sartre's ungluing (his fall into the abyss, Kracauer might say). But he saves himself once again by embodying polar opposites, by performing the ontological gymnastics he attributed to Jean Genet.⁶⁵ He explains how he reglues himself to the flotsam of total perception by having Anne-Marie perform a bit of piano movie accompaniment in the obscurity of their sitting room back at home. Sartre writes: "the music substitutes itself for my soul [and] inhabits me . . . I was possessed. . . . To your horses, men! I was both mount and rider, I rode and was ridden" [*cavale et cavalier . . . chevauchant et chevauché*]⁶⁶ meaning "I was both father and (feminized)

son" for anyone the least familiar with Sartre's metaphors for the father-son relation.⁶⁷

Poulou found it easy to imagine himself Anne-Marie's sister. Why not also her father or even her mother? By persistently calling her "Anne-Marie" instead of the usual "maman," Sartre underscores his knowledge of miraculous biblical genealogy: Ann birthed Mary, the virgin mother who in turn birthed Christ, the son of man. In Christian iconography, the lesser-known inversion of the "Madonna and Child" configuration is the "Dormition" in which Christ holds his miniature, infant-sized virgin mother in *his* arms. Like Louis Feuillades's film character, Fantômas, the criminal genius and master of disguise who nurtured the surrealists' fantasy of ubiquity, movies with his mother fed Sartre's wish to simultaneously occupy each of the family instances—another way of being total being. It is not incest that sets the Sartre desiring machine into motion but going to the movies. That experience was the ultimate perceptual phantasm: a dialectic of concentration and distraction in which gender specificity had no bearing.

The streaming filmic flux of youth converges with the young boy's tears shed for a virgin widow to form Sartre's weeping at the cinema with Beauvoir, the female companion of his adulthood. As a boy Sartre loved the cinema "for what it lacked"—presumably more technical sophistication: "I was seven and could read. The cinema was twelve and couldn't talk."⁶⁸ One day in the late 1920s, when the lights went up at the end of Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, the first "talkie" having sung more than it talked,⁶⁹ Beauvoir bore witness to the unexpected sight of Sartre crying.⁷⁰ Al Jolson, Beauvoir writes, had just sung "Sonny Boy." The last song of the film is, in actuality, "Mammy." No matter: the memories of movies with his mother, of his status as son that the sound of this song stirred must indeed have been overwhelming. Sartre's trajectory from movies with his mother to movies with Beauvoir is one that leads him to "professional" viewing. His childhood experience was one that fluctuated between distraction and concentration. What kind of loss did this evolution entail with respect to an intensely pleasurable perception of film?

As we saw, Sartre spoke of an enjoyable "contraction" at a certain point in his youthful "idealistic" spectatorship. I think this translates as a loss or reduction of experiential openness that allowed Sartre to speak and write his cinematic experiences, professionally. Such a loss for ideological gain was undoubtedly shared with Beauvoir. A sense of this common loss is conveyed in their complex name-playing. Sartre's nickname for Beauvoir was "le Castor," the castor or the beaver, a nickname originally given by one of their mutual school friends for the spurious eponymic relation between "beaver" and "Beauvoir"—a linguistic similarity corresponding to her purported gregariousness and diligence. A lesser-known characteristic of the beaver is that when attacked by a predator, the male will occasionally castrate himself in self-defense. Furthermore, Sartre was well aware of *his* patronymic's origin in the Latin *sartor*: he considered himself a tailor or sculptor of words.⁷¹ The first Faulkner novel to be dissected by the sartorial pen was *Sartoris*. But before we go simply thinking that Sartre fancies

himself the castrator and Beauvoir the castrated, he drops his scissor-wielding role in *La Mort dans l'âme* (1947) where we learn that the real name of the anarchist, Schneider ("tailor" or "castrator" in German), is Vicarios—the vicar, he who acts in the place of another in ceremonial occasions. Even in *fiction* Sartre tries to occupy all possible positions.

There are slight but significant differences between Sartre's professional approach to film with Beauvoir and his "polymorphously perverse" reaction to the cinema with his mother. Sartre and Beauvoir had to suppress part of that originary perceptivity in order to fill the socially endorsed role of professional viewer. In Sartre's case, this loss is attested to most poignantly in the words of an elegy (to date the only poetry of his of which there is record) that Beauvoir remembers the young Sartre to have once written:

Adouci par le sacrifice d'une violette,
Le grand miroir d'acier laisse un arrière-goût mauve aux yeux.⁷²

On those rare occasions where Sartre wrote as film critic, he retained some of the concentrated sensitivity that in his map of personal symbols is represented by the violet and that Kracauer, denying it in himself, attributed only to women.

Notes

I wish to thank Ann Kaplan and Dana Polan for their critical readings and generous suggestions.

1. Many of the recent articles on spectatorship are cited within these notes. Some of the principle researchers in the field are Jean-Louis Baudry, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane, Thomas Elsaesser, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, Stephen Heath, E. Ann Kaplan, Gertrud Koch, Judith Mayne, Patricia Mellencamp, Christian Metz, Tania Modleski, Steve Neale, Constance Penley, Patrice Petro, B. Ruby Rich, Heide Schlüppmann, and Linda Williams. See also E. Diedre Pribram, ed. *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (New York: Verso, 1988).
2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18; reprinted in *Women and the Cinema*, ed. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: Dutton, 1977), 412-28.
3. Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 4 (1986): 6-32 at 7.
4. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" *Framework* nos. 15/16/17 (1981): 12-16; reprinted in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 29-38.
5. Speculative research on cinematic spectatorship arose from the fertile ground of continental theory of the 1970s but has its roots in cultural criticism as far back as the 1920s, particularly in the work of Siegfried Kracauer.
6. Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism" in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), 46-66 at 55; reprinted from *New German Critique* no. 23 (1981): 27-43.
7. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.
8. Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification," 11ff.

9. Teresa de Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" in *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 133.
10. Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification," 10.
11. For another approach to Sartre as cinematic spectator, see Shuji Morita, "Sartre dans la salle obscure," *Etudes de langue et littérature françaises* no. 48 (Tokyo 1986): 102-18.
12. Existence, which is at the root of Roquentin's nausea, is represented as a fluid, rotting, murky, feminine medium threatening to engulf the subject (male by Sartre's reckoning). Personified transcendence, which toils to overcome the absurdity of existence, is quite blatantly phallic as Polan's observation indicates (see my main text *infra*). For Sartre the feminine is repulsive but necessary and the masculine, admirable but forever lacking.
13. Dana Polan, "Sartre and Cinema," *Post-script* 7, no. 1 (1987): 66-88 at 86.
14. Polan's article contains a thorough analysis of these largely "occasional pieces by Sartre" from which "it would no doubt be exorbitant to look for a full-fledged theory and practice of cinema."
15. Here I am thinking of Mulvey's early articles, Christian Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire* (Paris: Union Générale des Editions, 1977), and Jean-Louis Baudry's articles on the cinematic apparatus.
16. Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) from the French *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).
17. Christian Metz, "Le film de fiction et son spectateur (Etude métapsychologique)," *Communications* no. 23 (1975): 108-35 at 130; reprinted in *Le signifiant imaginaire*.
18. The text of this speech is reproduced in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 546-52. Dana Polan discusses its implications in depth in the article cited in note 13.
19. Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) 58.
20. Roland Barthes, "En sortant du cinéma," *Communications* no. 23 (1975): 104.
21. Metz, "Film de fiction," 132.
22. Some of Sartre's better-known articles on film include "Un film pour l'après-guerre" (1944), "Discussion sur la critique à propos de *L'Enfance d'Ivan*" (1962), and "Le cinéma nous donne sa première tragédie: *Les Abysses*" (1963). Cf. Contat and Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre*.
23. Polan, "Sartre and Cinema," 69.
24. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217-51.
25. One of *Cinema Journal's* anonymous readers has reminded me that distraction does not preclude critical examination.
26. Quoted in Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification," 15.
27. Thomas Elsaesser, "Dada/Cinema?," *Dada/Surrealism* no. 15 (1986): 13-27.
28. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio], 1964). The passage in question runs 102-8 and Part One, entitled "Reading," ends at 116.
29. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 104.
30. Josette Pacaly, *Sartre au miroir* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980).
31. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 89.
32. *Ibid.*, 105.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Sigmund Freud, "The Tendency to Debasement in Love," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 11 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 180-83.
35. Prose is the most masculine form of writing, according to Sartre. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

36. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 103-4.
37. In a poetic and enigmatic formula, Mulvey speculates on a phenomenological foundation of male scopophilia produced by the apparatus itself: "The extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation." Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 416.
38. Roland Barthes, "En sortant du cinéma," 105.
39. Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* in *Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1981), 26.
40. Sartre, *La Nausée*, 82-83.
41. Jean-Paul Sartre, "L'Enfance d'un chef" in *Oeuvres romanesques*, 315.
42. The establishments Sartre names (*Les Mots*, 105) are the Kinérama, the Folies Dramatiques, the Vaudeville (which was a modified theater), and the Hippodrome (which quickly became the hub of Léon Gaumont's lucrative film monopoly, the Gaumont Palace).
43. *Zigomar* (France: 1911, 1912, 1913), *Fantômas* (France: 1913-14), *Les Exploits de Maciste* (Italy: 1912) and *Les Mystères de New York* (U.S.A.: 1915).
44. See note 24.
45. Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 311-17 and 279-94. Tom Levin's translation of "Cult of Distraction" appeared in *New German Critique* no. 40 (1987): 91-96. Harvard University Press is due to publish Levin's translation of *The Mass Ornament* in its entirety.
One critic views "Cult of Distraction" as a direct ancestor of the "culture industry" sections of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*: see Heide Schlüppmann, "Phenomenology of Film: On Siegfried Kracauer's Writings of the 1920's," *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 97-114. Much of this issue of *NGC* is devoted to Kracauer's work.
46. Kracauer, "Cult," 92.
47. *Ibid.*, 94-95.
48. *Ibid.*, 94.
49. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930] (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 11-20.
50. Patrice Petro, "Mass Culture and the Feminine: the 'Place' of Television in Film Studies," *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 3 (1986): 17-18.
51. Adorno's quote is taken from Schlüppmann, "Phenomenology of Film," 99.
52. For further discussion of Adorno observing Kracauer observing women observing film see Petro, "Mass Culture and the Feminine" and Heide Schlüppmann, "Kinosucht," *Frauen und Film* no. 33 (1982): 45-52. Citing Schlüppmann's article in which she observes that "the writings of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno [show] contempt for 'feminized' reception," Petro says that the essay further "links intellectual attitudes towards the cinema with a pervasive patriarchal bias." (19)
53. Patrice Petro, "Modernity and Mass Culture in Weimar: Contours of a Discourse on Sexuality in Early Theories of Perception and Representation," *New German Critique* no. 40 (1987): 122.
54. The problem of women viewed as passive and unwitting spectators of their own oppression has of course been the object of much of the critical work produced by feminists. Mary Ann Doane, for example, writes of the premise in culture of a "certain naïveté assigned to women in relation to systems of signification" (*Desire to Desire*, 1). Judith Mayne invokes Molly Haskell's wonderment over "why it is that emotional response should be so devalued as to be relegated to an 'inferior' genre" ("Woman at the Keyhole," 50).
55. Adrienne Rich coined the term "re-vision," defining it as "the act of looking back,

- of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." See Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 35. These words inspired the title of the collection of essays in feminist film criticism cited at note 6.
56. Cf. Sarah Kofman, *Camera obscura, de l'idéologie* (Paris: Galilée, 1973).
 57. This may have been Sartre's first stirrings as social critic since the type of diversions he was resisting as a child were those that the dominant culture purposefully contrived to draw ever greater audiences but that had nothing to do with the films.
 58. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 106-7; my emphasis.
 59. Metz, "Film de fiction," 115.
 60. Jean-Paul Sartre, "De la qualité comme révélatrice de l'être" in *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 661-78.
 61. Serge Doubrovsky argues that Sartre's philosophical writings contain more reliable information about desire than his intimate writings in "Retouches à un autoportrait" in *Autobiographiques, de Corneille à Sartre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).
 62. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: différence sexuelle, différence ontologique," *L'Herne* (1983), 419-20.
 63. Metz, "Film de fiction," 114; my emphasis.
 64. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 106; my emphasis.
 65. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
 66. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 108-9. *Cavale* is a poetic term for a thoroughbred mare, thus Sartre underscores with yet another element his ambivalent position with respect to gender and sexuality.
 67. In an earlier passage of *Les Mots* where he condemns paternity, Sartre assimilates all sons to an Aeneas who has to carry Anchises on his back for his entire existence (18).
 68. Sartre, *Les Mots*, 105.
 69. The soundtrack, as such, carries only the recordings of the film's songs. Jolson's speaking voice is only heard in one brief scene when he addresses his mother affectionately just before breaking into song.
 70. Beauvoir, *Force de l'âge*, 58.
 71. Cutting and carving are often interchangeable in Sartre's vocabulary, e.g., "Je taillais des mots dans la pierre."
 72. Quoted by Beauvoir, *Force de l'âge*, 53. My translation: "Subdued by the sacrifice of a violet, / The great steel mirror leaves a mauve aftertaste in my eyes."