The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital Sweet Hereafter

Lowenstein, Adam.

Cinema Journal, 46, Number 3, Spring 2007, pp. 54-82 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press
DOI: 10.1353/cj.2007.0024

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cj/summary/v046/46.3lowenstein.html
The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital *Sweet Hereafter*

by Adam Lowenstein

Abstract: This essay analyzes the influence of surrealism on Bazin and Barthes to argue that their commitment to photographic realism is more accurately described as an investment in surrealism. This revised take on the work of Bazin and Barthes is tested against notions of cinema in the age of new media by examining *The Sweet Hereafter* within an “intermediated” context.

In “The Myth of Total Cinema” (1946), film theorist André Bazin writes, “Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!” In “The Third Meaning” (1970), cultural semiotician Roland Barthes states, “Forced to develop in a civilization of the signified, it is not surprising that (despite the incalculable number of films in the world) the filmic should still be rare . . . so much so that it could be said that as yet the film does not exist.” Although Bazin’s “cinema” and Barthes’s “filmic” are not equivalent terms, the similarities between these declarations suggest a neglected trajectory in film theory this essay seeks to trace: pursuing surrealism’s influence on Bazin and Barthes in order to illuminate how their shared commitment to the realism of the photographic image, so often misunderstood as a naïvely literalist stance, is much more accurately described as an investment in surrealism. In the essay’s second half, this revised take on Bazin and Barthes will be tested against our current desire to understand cinema’s role in the digital age of new media. By examining *The Sweet Hereafter* as an *intermediated* text characterized by modes of spectatorship brought to the fore in the new media era—that is, as a text that exists for spectators *between* the media forms of Russell Banks’s 1991 source novel, Atom Egoyan’s 1997 film adaptation, and New Line Home Video’s 1998 DVD—I will demonstrate how today’s possibilities for intermediated spectatorship demand that we revisit yesterday’s surrealist visions of “enlarged” cinematic spectatorship.

Adam Lowenstein is an associate professor of English and film studies at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005). His current book project, from which this essay is excerpted, considers the intersections between cinematic spectatorship, surrealism, and new media.

© 2007 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

54 Cinema Journal 46, No. 3, Spring 2007
The notion of considering Bazin and Barthes together may seem a rather unpromising point of departure. After all, Bazin's passionate devotion to cinema characterizes his work as clearly as Barthes's ambivalent, self-described "resistance to film" (TM 66) marks his own. Although both men frequently ponder the nature of cinema by turning to related media forms for instructive comparisons, they tend to spin these comparisons (especially between photography and cinema) in very different directions. For example, in "Death Every Afternoon" (1949), Bazin asserts that "a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other." When Barthes begins his own meditation on the relays between photography, death, and mourning in *Camera Lucida* (1980), he admits, "I decided I liked Photography in opposition to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it." Although Barthes refers briefly to Bazin later in *Camera Lucida* (a reference to which I will return), the passing mention seems more puzzling than enlightening. As Colin MacCabe observes while comparing *Camera Lucida* with Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), "Once one has noticed the parallels between Bazin's and Barthes's theses, it becomes absolutely extraordinary that Barthes makes no mention of Bazin in his bibliography." MacCabe concludes that Barthes's exclusion of Bazin indicates just how "immense" the differences that divide these two texts really are, however "striking" their similarities may appear to be. But as I will argue here, these similarities may run even deeper than we imagined.

**Bazin, Sartre, and Photographic Surrealism.** Dudley Andrew has discovered persuasive evidence in Bazin's unpublished notes that "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" was written in direct response to Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* (1940), the very same book to which Barthes dedicates *Camera Lucida*. Sartre, whose philosophy in 1940 was powerfully influenced by Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology without having fully developed the existentialism that would structure his later work, devotes painstaking attention in *L'Imaginaire* to distinguishing between perception and imagination. He describes perception as our sensual observation of an object in the world, and imagination as our mental representation (or "quasi-observation") of such an object. For Sartre, perception and imagination must not be confused as interrelated points on a continuum of consciousness; instead, they are fundamentally different forms of consciousness. Sartre maintains that "we can never perceive a thought nor think a perception. They are radically distinct phenomena. In a word, the object of perception constantly overflows consciousness; the object of an image [or imagination] is never anything more than the consciousness one has of it; it is defined by that consciousness: one can never learn from an image what one does not know already." This stark division between perception and imagination leads Sartre to claim that the photograph has no privileged relation to reality or to perception, that it suffers from the same "essential poverty" that afflicts all acts of imagination: the photograph can only reveal what the viewer has already brought to their encounter with it, so it cannot teach...
us anything we do not already know. As Sartre explains, “if that photo appears to me as the photo ‘of Pierre,’ if, in some way, I see Pierre behind it, it is necessary that the piece of card is animated with some help from me, giving it a meaning it did not yet have. If I see Pierre in the photo, it is because I put him there.”

If Sartre provides the initial inspiration for both Bazin and Barthes in their work on the image, neither one ultimately agrees with Sartre’s account of the photograph. For Bazin, what makes the photograph (and cinema, as a photographic medium) so important is its ability to conjoin those aspects of perception and imagination that Sartre divides. If Sartre’s photograph excludes objective perception (or “observation”) in favor of subjective imagination (or “quasi-observation”), then Bazin’s photograph unites imagination’s subjectivity with perception’s objectivity. To quote the famous passage from “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”:

The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.

Here, Bazin ascribes to the photograph the very power that Sartre denies it: the power to reveal to the viewer something about the world that the viewer neither knows through imagination nor can know through perception. For Bazin, the photograph captures, and allows us to glimpse, a reality that eludes both perception and imagination by uniting mechanical objectivity (which he describes as the “impassive” perception belonging to the camera, not to the viewer) with affective subjectivity (which he describes as the “love” of the viewer responding to this reality newly revealed through photography). For Sartre, when one detects true “life” or “expression” in a photograph, it is due solely to the viewer’s input; for Bazin, the photographic experience that reveals the world anew is forged between the camera’s contribution and the viewer’s contribution.

Bazin’s sense of the photographic experience as a union of perception and imagination, of mechanical objectivity and affective subjectivity, mirrors André Breton’s vision of a surrealist union between dream and reality in certain important respects. In “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), Breton writes, “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.” Although Breton’s surreality incorporates a number of explicitly political dimensions that Bazin’s photographic realism does not, both men aim to dissolve distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, perception and imagination, nature and representation. Indeed, Bazin turns to the case of surrealist photography in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” to crystallize what he describes as photography’s capacity to conjoin two different ambitions that have structured the history of Western painting:
“pseudorealism” and “true realism.” For Bazin, “pseudorealism” (OP 12) manifests itself as trompe l’oeil illusionism—a variety of visual deceptions that trick the eye into mistaking representation for reality. “Pseudorealism” is rooted in humanity’s psychological need to duplicate the natural world through representation or to “have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures” (OP 10), a psychological condition Bazin diagnoses as a “mummy complex” (OP 9) or a “resemblance complex” (OP 13). “True realism” (OP 12), on the other hand, is rooted in the aesthetic rather than the psychological, in “the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcends its model” (OP 11). In other words, art that uncovers reality’s hidden essence counts as “true realism” by elevating an aesthetic commitment to revealing essential reality above the psychological need for illusionism’s duplication of superficial reality.

The surrealist, according to Bazin, marries psychological “pseudorealism” to aesthetic “true realism” by erasing “the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real” (OP 15). The evidence for this marriage can be seen in “the fact that surrealist painting combines tricks of visual deception [a hallmark of ‘pseudorealism’] with meticulous attention to detail [a hallmark of ‘true realism’]” (OP 16). Bazin’s very terms of “pseudorealism” and “true realism,” of course, echo Sartre’s distinction between perception’s “observation” and imagination’s “quasi-observation,” but surrealism gives Bazin the means to interweave what Sartre separates—Bazin outlines those aspects of “pseudorealism” present in perception and “true realism” in imagination. The result is that Bazin’s most complete formulation of realism in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” emerges as a version of surrealism, where the rational and irrational meet, while Sartre’s notion of reality is constituted by maintaining strict divisions between the levels of rational perception and “irrational” imagination.16

When Bazin claims that “a very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model but despite the promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith” (OP 14), he revises Sartre’s account of the photograph in order to argue that photographic media possess a special ability to “bear away our faith,” to combine rational fact with irrational belief.17 We will recall Sartre’s insistence that “if I see Pierre in the photo, it is because I put him there.” But Bazin maintains, in effect, that “seeing” Pierre in the fullness of reality is not simply an act of viewer imagination (putting Pierre in the photo), but of complicated collaboration between the mechanical objectivity of the photographic medium and the affective subjectivity of the viewer’s response to, and belief in, the photographic image. For Bazin, it is the surrealists who truly grasp the unique potential of photographic media to stage an encounter between camera and viewer where the image of an object emerges in both its rational concreteness and its irrational essence. This is the object understood through the lens of what Breton refers to as surreality, or the resolution of dream and reality, and what Bazin refers to as factual hallucination, or the resolution of psychological “pseudorealism” and aesthetic “true realism.” The surrealist, according to
Bazin, insists on precisely that resolution of imagination and perception refused by Sartre—an insistence that “every image is to be seen as an object and every object as an image” (OP 15–16). Bazin continues, “Hence photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact” (OP 16).18

Here, Bazin attributes to surrealism an understanding of photography’s most remarkable power—to present the world as a factual hallucination, as an irrational dream coextensive with rational reality. In other words, Bazin sees photographic media as having privileged access to certain modes of surrealist revelation—modes that not only bridge the gap between Sartre’s perception and imagination, but also between unknowable nature and knowable representation. When Rosalind Krauss summarizes the “aesthetic of surrealism” as “an experience of reality transformed into representation” she helps shed light on what Bazin, himself a one-time “fanatic surrealist” and “energetic practitioner of automatic writing,” may be after he turns to surrealism near the end of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” The experience of reality made photographic, in its capacity to merge the knowable and the unknowable by encompassing both mechanical objectivity and viewer subjectivity, takes shape for Bazin, finally, as a surrealist phenomenon. Just prior to concluding that “photography is clearly the most important event in the history of plastic arts” (OP 16), Bazin chooses to describe the photographic experience of reality in very particular terms: through surrealism’s unmasking of reality as surreality.

This is not to say that every time Bazin speaks of “realism” in his work on the cinema, what he really means is “surrealism.” This would be impossible, for “realism,” as Bazin’s central theoretical concept and critical standard, undergoes a number of significant transformations within and between his most important writings. But it is striking, especially given the conventional interpretations of Bazin as primarily concerned with cinema’s faithful (even indexical) reproduction of preexisting reality, how often Bazin’s “realism” moves toward the territory of surrealism. Consider, for example, Bazin’s profound admiration for surrealism’s most important filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, whom he calls “one of the rare poets of the screen—perhaps its greatest.” Bazin insists that “Buñuel’s surrealism is no more than a desire to reach the bases of reality; what does it matter if we lose our breath there like a diver weighted down with lead, who panics when he cannot feel sand underfoot.” Or Bazin’s enthusiasm for Federico Fellini’s Le Notti di Cabiria (1957), a film that transports us beyond the “boundaries of realism” through “‘poetry’ or ‘surrealism’ or ‘magic’—whatever the term that expresses the hidden accord which things maintain with an invisible counterpart of which they are, so to speak, merely the adumbration.” “Fellini is not opposed to realism,” explains Bazin, “but rather that he achieves it surpassingly in a poetic reordering of the world.” Or Bazin’s appreciation of Jean Painlevé, the surrealist master of the scientific documentary, whose films inspire Bazin to exclaim,

What brilliant choreographer, what delirious painter, what poet could have imagined these arrangements, these forms and images! The camera alone possesses the secret
key to this universe where supreme beauty is identified at once with nature and chance: that is, with all that a certain traditional aesthetic considers the opposite of art. The surrealists alone foresaw the existence of this art that seeks in the most impersonal automatism of their imagination a secret factory of images.  

Ultimately, then, Bazin must be understood not as the naïve realist he is so often mistaken for, but as a complex film theorist whose work reminds us of the realism within surrealism, and reveals to us the surrealism within realism.

**Through the Lens of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida***. Roland Barthes’s own sense of experiencing the photographic image depends, like Bazin’s, on a conception of photographic realism finally much closer to surrealism than to the faithful, indexical reproduction of preexisting reality. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes proclaims, “The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted the Photograph was an image without code—even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it—the realists do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art” (*CL* 88). In his excellent study of Barthes’s work on photography and film, Steven Ungar identifies this moment in *Camera Lucida* as a retraction of Barthes’s earlier position in “The Photographic Message” (1961) that the photographic image is a “message without a code,” where indexical content trumps style so completely that photography must be seen as fundamentally different from what Barthes calls “the whole range of analogical reproductions of reality—drawings, painting, cinema, theater.”  

I would argue instead that this moment in *Camera Lucida* is closer to a retrenchment than a retraction of Barthes’s earlier notion of photographic realism—it functions as a clarification that this realism was always closer to an affective “emanation” than to pure reproduction, and thus also closer (at least indirectly) to Bazin’s factual hallucination than to Sartre’s essential poverty of the imagined image. Barthes’s definition of himself as a realist underlines his commitment to photography as a unique experience for the viewer that distinguishes it from any of the other arts—an experience ultimately linked more intimately to a surrealistic uncovering of reality than to a realistic reproduction of reality. When Barthes refers to the “special credibility of the photograph” or how, in the photograph, “the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation” (*CL* 89), he points toward a surrealism of the photographic image that recalls Bazin’s revision of Sartre: only a photograph holds the “irrational power” to “bear away our faith” (OP 14).

Of course, Barthes differs from Bazin by assigning this special power to the photograph alone, rather than to the photograph and to the cinema, as Bazin does. But Barthes’s investment in the extraordinary affect generated for the viewer by the photographic image mirrors Bazin’s own, even if Barthes disagrees about which media possess this affective impact. Consider, for example, Barthes’s well-known distinction in *Camera Lucida* between the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* includes those aspects of a photograph that arouse in the viewer “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . but without special acuity” (*CL* 26). The *studium*,
which encompasses the historical, cultural, and political substance of the photograph, locks the viewer at the level of what Barthes calls “an average affect” (CL 26). The punctum, on the other hand, is that rare quality in certain photographs that bursts through the studium for the viewer. A photograph’s punctum “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (CL 26). For Barthes, the extraordinary, “wounding” affect produced for the viewer by the punctum is as private, intimate, and untranslatable as the studium’s “average” affect is public, social, and articulable. The stubbornly idiosyncratic nature of the punctum emerges most dramatically when Barthes refuses to reproduce the photograph that, for him, captures the punctum with the strongest intensity: a photograph of his own recently deceased mother as a young girl standing inside a glassed-in conservatory known as a Winter Garden. Barthes writes, “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’ . . . at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (CL 73).

The affective wound of the punctum crystallizes Barthes’s attempt to recast Sartre’s L’Imaginaire. For Barthes, the punctum is what Sartre’s “classical phenomenology” would not speak about: “desire and mourning” (CL 21). If Bazin revised Sartre by bringing together in the photographic experience what Sartre separates as imagination and perception, then Barthes revises Sartre in a similar way—by giving the photograph the power to animate the viewer through the punctum, to show him something he did not already imagine and to feel something he could not have accessed without the photograph. Barthes, like Bazin before him, also turns to surrealism to rework Sartre’s sense of the image. When Barthes emphasizes the unpredictability of the punctum, the fact that it “shows no preference for morality or good taste” (CL 43), he echoes Breton’s definitions of surrealism as existing “in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” and of the surrealist image as a “spark” that arrives (quoting Baudelaire) “spontaneously, despotically.”31 Barthes also evokes the paradoxical quality of the surrealist “spark” to sketch the punctum’s untranslatable effect on the viewer: “certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name; it is sharp and yet lands in a vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash . . . Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes” (CL 52–53).

While Bazin argues that the reality revealed by the photograph is neither reducible to nor exhausted by the reality of our perception, Barthes states a similar formulation in even more provocative terms: seeing a photograph is not at all the same thing as looking at a photograph with one’s eyes. The surreal essence of the photographic experience, whether in terms of Bazin’s factual hallucination or Barthes’s “floating flash” of the punctum, expands relations between the viewer and the world. For Bazin, the world reveals itself to the viewer through the photograph; for Barthes, the viewer is revealed to himself in the affect triggered by
the photograph. In both cases, the network of relations connecting the viewer and
the world is enlarged—in the encounter between photograph and viewer, some
new form of knowledge, affect, sensation, and/or revelation is added to the world.
For Bazin, “photography actually contributes something to the order of natural
creation instead of providing a substitute for it. The surrealists had an inkling of
this when they looked to the photographic plate to provide them with their mons-
strosities and for this reason: the surrealist does not consider his aesthetic purpose
and the mechanical effect of the image on our imaginations as things apart” (OP 15).
For Barthes, the punctum contains “a power of expansion” (CL 45) that causes
the viewer to “add” to a photograph in much the same manner as the surrealists would
“enlarge” their experience of certain films by generating fantasies of their own
and discovering forms of “irrational knowledge” only suggested by the film itself.
For example, Barthes describes how a photograph by André Kertész includes the
punctum of a dirt road that causes him to re-embody (rather than simply recall) his
own personal encounter with central Europe: “I recognize, with my whole body,
the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and
Rumania” (CL 45).

Surrealist Enlargement. Similarly, Jean Ferry’s 1934 surrealist appreciation of
King Kong (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) describes how the
film, not through intentional design but through “the involuntary liberation of ele-
ments in themselves heavy with oneiric power, with strangeness, and with the hor-
rible,” rekindles his own nightmares of being trapped in a room with a savage
beast.32 Ferry eloquently describes how the encounter between external film and
internal fantasy creates an expanded text that exists in the surreal space between
inside and outside, subjective and objective, film and spectator; he claims that in
this sense, King Kong corresponds “to all that we mean by the adjective ‘poetic’
and in which we had the temerity to hope the cinema would be its most fertile na-
tive soil.”33 Ferry’s account of King Kong as “poetic” grants the film an expansive
power that very much resembles Barthes’s punctum—indeed, Ferry exemplifies a
long tradition of surrealist engagements with the cinema predicated on the con-
cept of “enlarging” a film through a variety of methods.34

For instance, in “Data Toward the Irrational Enlargement of a Film: The
Shanghai Gesture” (1951), a second-generation group of surrealists adapt “the ex-
perimental researches on the irrational knowledge of the object” undertaken by
Breton and other first-generation surrealists in 1933.35 The first-generation surreal-
ists, in the journal Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, explored the “possibil-
ities” of objects ranging from a crystal ball to a painting by Giorgio de Chirico by
posing questions to each object and then answering them spontaneously. The group’s
collected responses were then analyzed to uncover facets of “irrational knowl-
edge” concerning each object (so that the object could then be rediscovered).36

The second-generation surrealists applied this method to a cinematic object,
Josef von Sternberg’s The Shanghai Gesture (1941). The questions posed to the
film—“What ought to happen when Mother Gin-Sling comes down to the gambling room after the revolver shot?; At what moment should a snowfall take place?; How does Omar exist outside of the film?; What don’t we see?” do indeed aim to “enlarge” it. They are questions that encourage a collision between the film itself and the fantasies of its viewers so that a new, enlarged text that belongs neither to the director alone nor to the audience alone comes into being. And the answers to these questions—for example, one surrealist replies that a snowfall “should happen upside down, from bottom to top, at the moment the women are hoisted up in their cages”—anticipate Barthes’s attempts to describe the punctum. Both Barthes and the surrealists tend to focus on a certain detail in the cinematic or photographic object that “pricks” them, unleashing a deeply felt but idiosyncratic “spark” or “floating flash” between object and viewer; the object becomes enlarged through the viewer’s response to it. When Barthes, directly inspired by Bazin’s concept of a “blind field” (more on this below), describes finding a photograph’s punctum in the detail of a woman’s necklace that allows her to have “a whole life external to her portrait” (CL 57), he echoes the description the second-generation surrealists provide for the irrational enlargement of a film: a “strategy of poetic thought” where the object, “freed of its rational characteristics, begins to assume the multiple reflections of the perceptible world, is set . . . in all the rings of reality.” So the enlarged film of the surrealists, like Barthes’s expanded photograph, partakes of a reality beyond the rational (a surreality), where photographic objectivity and viewer subjectivity overlap and ignite each other.

For the surrealists, this spark could sometimes be set alight by violating basic conventions of cinematic spectatorship, such as Breton’s account of darting in and out of different movie screenings at random junctures, without any concern for selection, continuity, or narrative development. Breton, writing in 1951 about his film-going experiences some 35 years earlier, recalls appreciating “nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom—of surfeit—to rush off to another cinema.” Breton also describes how he and Jacques Vaché would “settle down to dinner” inside a movie theater, “opening cans, slicing bread, uncorking bottles, and talking in ordinary tones, as if around a table, to the great amazement of the spectators, who dared not say a word.” Of course, Breton’s spectatorship practices can be seen as an adaptation and extension of the surrealist project of automatic writing, where instinct and chance are designed to trump conscious craft as the engines of artistic creation, but they also seem designed to maximize cinema’s unique potential to energize viewer fantasies. For Breton, the value of cinema lies in the disorienting power it provides the viewer to enlarge the film, to charge one’s own fantasies (located on that surreal edge between waking and sleeping) through the battery that is the film—he says of his unorthodox filmgoing experiences that “I have never known anything more magnetizing . . . the important thing is that one came out ‘charged’ for a few days.”
But this is where Barthes seems to part ways with the surrealists: he does not grant the cinema a punctum, a power of expansion. “Do I add to the images in movies? I don’t think so; I don’t have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not pensiveness; whence the interest, for me, of the photogram” (CL 55). It is significant that at precisely this point in Camera Lucida, after Barthes refers indirectly to his own earlier study of photograms in “The Third Meaning,” that he makes his one explicit mention of Bazin. Barthes refers to Bazin’s sense of the film screen “not [as] a frame but a hide-out; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living: a ‘blind field’ constantly doubles our partial vision” (CL 55–56). Barthes admits that this “blind field,” where cinematic figures emerge from the screen as alive for the viewer, is “a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have” (CL 55). But Barthes goes on to explain that the punctum allows certain photographs to create a “blind field” of their own and thus grant the photographed subjects a life beyond the borders of the photograph for the viewer. In other words, the punctum animates the photograph with a cinematic power.

In this manner, Bazin helps Barthes come closer than he does anywhere else in Camera Lucida to overcoming the opposition between photography and cinema.
that characterizes the book—an opposition that, in its own way, strains and limits Barthes as severely as the opposition between imagination and perception constrains Sartre. Bazin’s thought, as we have seen, offers a way to mediate between Sartre’s rigid distinctions; Bazin may have been able to provide a similar outlet for Barthes, but this is not the avenue Barthes chooses to pursue in *Camera Lucida*. To imagine what this path not taken may have looked like, and to continue pursuing the implications of surrealism for Barthes’s work on the image, it is necessary to return to “The Third Meaning,” an essay that not only prefigures *Camera Lucida* in many significant ways, but also transcends it in others.

**Barthes, Bataille, and “The Third Meaning.”** “The Third Meaning,” like *Camera Lucida* ten years later, was published in conjunction with the journal founded by Bazin, *Cahiers du cinéma*. In fact, “The Third Meaning” can be summarized, at one level, as Barthes’s meditation on reading film journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* after seeing the films discussed within their pages. The journal’s photograms, or film stills, are especially fascinating for Barthes. The film still provides fleeting entry into what Barthes refers to as “the filmic,” an elusive alternate text both attached to and distinct from the film itself. To read this alternate text called “the filmic” is to access the level of “obtuse meaning” or “third meaning,” to move beyond the image’s first level of explicit information and second level of implicit symbolism into a third-level realm where “language and metalanguage end” (TM 64).

The filmic, then, as the repository of third meaning, is “theoretically locatable but not describable” (TM 65). It is the photographic essence that Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, assigns to the photograph’s *punctum* but not to the cinema. Yet in “The Third Meaning,” when Barthes focuses on the presence of the filmic in stills taken from Sergei Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* (1925) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944/1946), he carefully distinguishes these stills from conventional photographs in that the stills depend on the “diegetic horizon” (TM 66) of the films to which they are connected. As Barthes explains, “film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is on top of the other or that one is extracted from the other” (TM 67). Here Barthes dares to imagine photography and cinema interwoven in a manner *Camera Lucida* steadfastly resists, and in the process provides an inkling of what *Camera Lucida* may have become had Barthes allowed Bazin to move from its margins to its center. In light of Barthes’s relation to the shared legacies of Bazin, Sartre, and surrealism, his definition of the film still as the gateway to the filmic and to third meaning could be read as a variation on surrealist enlargements of cinema. Indeed, Barthes’s contention that the film still “throws off the constraint of filmic time . . . [that continues] to form an obstacle to what might be called the adult birth of film” (TM 67) echoes Breton’s own revolt against filmic time through his random entrances and exits from the movie theater, just as Barthes’s designation of third meaning (anticipating his definition of the *punctum*) as “indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories” (TM 55) nearly duplicates Breton’s definition of surrealism as “exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”

64  *Cinema Journal* 46, No. 3, Spring 2007
However, Barthes’s sense of third meaning as akin to surrealist enlargement is indebted not only to Breton, but also to another crucial surrealist thinker: Georges Bataille. Breton and Bataille are often considered polar opposites in their theoretical stances, owing to a series of vicious public condemnations of each other in 1930 over the spirit and direction of the surrealist movement. Although the caricatures of Breton as blindly romantic idealist and Bataille as hopelessly perverse materialist that emerged from these condemnations gesture toward major differences concerning the possibilities of surrealism as politics, Barthes seems to grasp the complicated relationship between the two men as something closer to what Sarane Alexandrian has described as “closely united, like day and night, like conscious and unconscious.” Barthes, like Bataille, often qualifies his support for Breton’s version of surrealism, but both return consistently to the framework of surrealism nonetheless.

In “The Third Meaning,” Barthes mentions Bataille’s essay “The Big Toe” (1929) as situating for Barthes “one of the possible regions of [third] meaning.” Bataille argues that “the big toe is the most human part of the human body.” The big toe’s often grotesque and hilariously absurd appearance, its absolute necessity for standing upright coupled with its inevitable filthiness and embarrassing inelegance, captures for Bataille the truth of the body that humankind so often wishes to shield itself from. “Since by its physical attitude the human race distances itself as much as it can from terrestrial mud,” writes Bataille, “one can imagine that a toe, always more or less damaged and humiliating, is psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of a man—in other words, to death. The hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe . . . gives a very shrill expression to the disorder of the human body, that product of the violent discord of the organs.” Bataille insists on the centrality of the base and the excretory, particularly in relation to the human body, as the foundation for a surrealist assault on conventional reality and social order. This insistence is precisely what Breton loathed in Bataille—Breton himself favored notions of love and beauty as the proper revolutionary forces of surrealism—but it is this very same dimension of Bataille that Barthes finds fascinating.

For Barthes, Bataille’s characterization of the big toe taps into one key aspect of third meaning: “an eroticism which includes the contrary of the beautiful, as also what falls outside such contrariety; its limit—inversion, unease, and perhaps sadism” (TM 59). In other words, the third meaning generated by the filmic may well ignite feelings of desire, sympathy, and sadness, but it may also stir darker regions of affect. If we consider the third meaning as a version of surrealist enlargements of the cinema, then the direction and effects of this enlargement remain unpredictable, even volatile. Third meaning resists control and intention—not only on the part of the filmmaker or the viewer, but also in terms of medium specificity. Third meaning, like the film still itself, partakes of both photography and cinema, but exceeds them both as well. Barthes discovers in the film still the traces of the filmic, “the fragment of a second text whose existence never exceeds the

Cinema Journal 46, No. 3, Spring 2007  65
fragment” (TM 67)—a second text that cannot be contained entirely either by the film still (which captures only a shard of this second text) or by the film itself (which contributes the backdrop of the “diegetic horizon” [TM 66] for this second text, but does not capture it in its own right). This second text, in other words, carries the third meaning; it is a filmic text that exists between the film still and the film itself. The filmic, then, comes into being through an intermediated encounter between film and photography that the viewer modulates—where meaning is created in the space between the two media forms.

Barthes’s sense of the filmic as intermediated may also owe something to Bataille’s surrealist project. “The Big Toe” appeared originally in a 1929 issue of the surrealist journal Documents, a groundbreaking periodical edited primarily by Bataille (with the assistance of Michel Leiris) that harnessed the forces of surrealism to turn an anthropological eye inward, towards the familiar and the everyday. Documents often employed striking juxtapositions of words and images to estrange the everyday, aiming to shock the established social order into a disturbing self-recognition; “The Big Toe” is no exception. Bataille’s essay is accompanied by the surrealist photographer Jacques-André Boiffard’s shots of human big toes, isolated and magnified in the style of scientific investigation. The captions of the photographs reinforce their clinical aspect: “Big toe, male subject, age 30”; “Big toe, female subject, age 24.” But the effect of the photographs, within the context of Documents in general and Bataille’s essay in particular, is a disorienting mixture of the aesthetic and the scientific, the grotesque and the beautiful, the familiar and the strange. In other words, Bataille’s description of the big toe as “the most human part of the human body,” with its attack on conventional notions of what constitutes the human, comes to life through these photographs—Boiffard’s images and Bataille’s words generate an intermediated meaning between writing and photography, one that speaks to the big toe’s paradoxical status as the shame of humanity and a simultaneous testament to humanity.

The photographs, with their magnified intensity and stark framing against black backgrounds, reveal all of those bodily imperfections that Bataille associates with humiliation, absurdity, and the cadaverous: unsightly hairs sprout from the base of the toe, layers of wrinkled skin crowd the cuticle, the toenail is a mass of chaotic indentations and scars. The addition of nail polish to the female toe only adds to its corpse-like appearance, calling to mind a bloody stain more than flattering ornamentation. But there is also a strong fascination at work here—we understand what Bataille means when he writes of the big toe’s base seductiveness, its stunning capacity to unmask the human body surprisingly and truthfully, to see ourselves in a shocking new light. The photographs offer themselves as glimpses not only of who we are, but of an alien organism unknown to us, the subject of our scientific curiosity. Bataille concludes his essay by suggesting that when one considers the big toe, he must face “a return to reality . . . to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe.” This reality is, of course, a surreality. It is the surreality made possible in the intermediated
space between word and photograph, where opening the eyes wide is not the same as reading an essay or seeing a photograph; instead, it is a moment of surrealist enlargement, when reality's meaning undergoes an expansion.

Bazin, as we have seen, locates this expansion in the photographic experience that forms the basis of cinema. Barthes, on the other hand, relegates this expansion to photography alone in *Camera Lucida*, but maintains the possibility of cinema's access to "the filmic" in "The Third Meaning" via the intermediated network between film and still. Both critics turn first toward Sartre and then toward surrealism to map the conjunction of photorealism and the enlargement of reality. And both critics ultimately recognize that the forms of cinema they are describing, whether in terms of "total cinema" or "the filmic," have not yet been fully born.

Would Bazin and Barthes maintain the same positions today? Or has the computerized age of new media changed all of this? Has the ascension of the digital erased forever the possibilities of that cinematic experience imagined by Bazin and Barthes as the province of the future, or has new media finally brought this future into the present? In other words, what spaces does surrealist spectatorship occupy in the cinematic experience today? I would like to consider these questions through a case study of cinema in the context of new media, with a nonsurrealist film whose intermediated nature is nonetheless especially provocative in light of Bazin and Barthes's engagements with surrealism: Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997).

**The Sweet Hereafter and Cinema's Digital Afterlife.** One of the strengths of Lev Manovich's influential study *The Language of New Media* is its sensitivity in examining the continuities (rather than fetishizing the discontinuities) between "new media," such as computer games, and "old media," such as cinema. But when Manovich catalogs what he calls "the effects of computerization on cinema proper," he excludes "new distribution technologies" such as the DVD. For Manovich, these digital technologies "will undoubtedly have an important effect on the economics of film production and distribution, [but] they do not appear to have a direct effect on film language."56

Does this assertion hold when we consider "film language" not only from the standpoint of production, but of reception as well? I will argue that the DVD, as one of new media's most popular objects (with total annual sales now outpacing theatrical ticket revenue for Hollywood feature films) and cinema's state-of-the-art home delivery format, does indeed offer the potential to change the practices of cinematic spectatorship and thus the texture of cinematic language. To pursue this claim, I will analyze *The Sweet Hereafter* in light of the preceding discussion of Bazin, Barthes, and surrealist enlargement—as an intermediated text located between its novel, film, and DVD incarnations. To consider *The Sweet Hereafter* as intermediated challenges us to extend the parameters of what we imagine comprising "cinema proper."

I should emphasize at the outset that the manner in which I seek to explore *The Sweet Hereafter* as intermediated is not based on the assumption that all viewers,
or even most viewers, will actually do the things this essay hypothesizes as practices of spectatorship. Nor do I propose that The Sweet Hereafter constitutes an entirely conventional case of intermediation that can stand in easily for a majority of other examples. Instead, I want to describe a horizon of spectatorship possibilities, some closer to and some further from realization by present-day audiences. But all of these possibilities (and others) are certainly invited, in varying degrees, by interdependent media forms in the digital era, as well as anticipated by the surrealist aspects of cinematic experience described by Bazin and Barthes. I do not, however, wish to posit The Sweet Hereafter itself as belonging to a living legacy of surrealist cinema, the way one might argue that the work of directors such as David Cronenberg, David Lynch, Guy Maddin, or Jan Švankmajer does. In other words, I want to examine how intermediation shifts cinema’s digital afterlife from the periphery to the center of potential cinematic experience and demands that we rethink how to draw the line between the languages of new media and old media, between contemporary spectatorship and surrealist spectatorship.

In both film and novel versions, The Sweet Hereafter tells the story of a small town torn apart by a tragic school bus accident that kills many of the town’s children. Although we are presented with events that occur both before and after the accident, the accident itself anchors the entire story by pulling every pre-traumatic and post-traumatic moment toward it. But if the story appears to attach us to a particular event as the heart of its narrative, the intermediated context of The Sweet Hereafter suggests, at times, something very different: more of a radiation outward toward multiple textualities and temporalities than a funneling inward toward an originary instant of narrative fact. But at other times, this intermediated context only serves to constrain the possibilities of spectatorship presented to readers/viewers/users of The Sweet Hereafter. This movement between forces of textuality and temporality shapes both the form and content of The Sweet Hereafter in complicated ways to which I will return shortly, but first we must consider the question of what exactly it means to delineate form and content in The Sweet Hereafter.

In a statement included on the DVD sleeve of The Sweet Hereafter, writer/director Atom Egoyan explains:

When I was asked to prepare the “chapters” for this DVD edition . . . I was faced with the unusual task of returning the project to its literary roots. Russell Banks’ novel is divided into five chapters, each bearing the name of one of the main characters. My original wish was to be able to divide the film using the same organizing principle . . . but this proved to be an awkward and highly contrived concept. More than any other stage in the making of this adaptation, this final gesture proved how far the novel had been deconstructed, only to be put back together again in a new and completely organic form.

Egoyan’s observation about intermedia translation is characteristically perceptive—this is the director, after all, whose feature films from Next of Kin (1984) to Where the Truth Lies (2005) have imaginatively dissected the psychological, social, and
cultural impact of media technologies including cinema, video, photography, and sound recording. But what does not ring quite true in Egoyan’s statement, especially after sampling the special features bundled with The Sweet Hereafter in its DVD edition, is the claim that the film represents a “completely organic” creation utterly distinct from its novel and DVD versions.

The DVD special features include an audio commentary track with Egoyan and Banks, a videotaped panel discussion concerning the project featuring both the director and the author entitled “Before and After The Sweet Hereafter,” a televised interview with Egoyan from The Charlie Rose Show, short interviews with most of the major cast members concerning their creative involvement on the film, and Kate Greenaway’s illustrated version of Robert Browning’s 1888 poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” (a crucial intertext for Egoyan’s film that does not appear in Banks’s novel). These features tend to highlight how much The Sweet Hereafter invites intermediated forms of spectatorship that blur boundaries between what constitutes “the novel,” “the film,” and “the DVD.” Indeed, an intermediated understanding of The Sweet Hereafter evokes Bazin’s prediction in “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest” (1948) that the “critic of the year 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been ‘made,’ but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic.”

In some ways, Bazin’s 2050 still seems a long way off. It is only very recently that scholars such as Kamilla Elliott, Colin MacCabe, and Robert Stam have begun to question the conventional concepts of “fidelity” and “purity” that have contributed to what James Naremore describes as a condition whereby “the very subject of adaptation has constituted one of the more jejune areas of scholarly writing about the cinema.” Despite this influx of new scholarship that promises to reinvigorate the area of adaptation studies, Bazin’s vision of a novel, play, and film comprising three equal sides of what critics will regard as a “single work” still reads more like science fiction than familiar critical practice. This circumstance is somewhat puzzling, because in many ways, Bazin’s 2050 has arrived much sooner and with much more intensity than he ever dreamed. At this point in time, Bazin’s pyramid resembles at least a decahedron when we imagine today’s single artworks composed not only of novel, play, and film versions, but of television programs, video games, comic books, toys, novelizations, remakes, Web sites, pop songs, music videos, etc.

Given this multimedia cacophony, how do we discuss “cinema” today? Where is it located? In what guises? Such questions compel us to return to the attempts undertaken by both Bazin and Barthes to describe cinema in terms of the surrealism of the photographic image, where cinematic experience emerges as a dance between different media forms as well as between text and spectator.

Exploring Intermediation. To observe this dance unfold in The Sweet Hereafter, I want to examine how the novel, film, and DVD imagine, alone and together, the
tragedy at the center of their narratives: the fatal school bus accident. In Banks's novel, the accident has already occurred before the book begins. The novel's five chapters, each designated with the name of the character narrating the chapter rather than numbered sequentially, relate events taking place both before and after the accident, but always from the temporal perspective of the accident's aftermath and always in the first-person voice of that chapter's title character. The first chapter belongs to Dolores Driscoll, the kind and conscientious school bus driver who must live with the anguish of surviving a catastrophe that has taken the lives of so many of the children she has driven safely to school, year in and year out. Her chapter begins and ends by describing the dog she believes she saw on the road the morning of the accident, the dog that caused her to swerve and the bus to plunge over the guardrail. Dolores describes this dog as something between an empirical fact and an enigmatic vision, an animal she begins by asserting she saw “for certain” but that she concludes was more likely “an optical illusion or a mirage, a sort of afterimage.”60 The fact that Banks, from the very beginning, employs photographic and cinematic metaphors to foreground questions about the nature of vision indicates how the intermediated context of The Sweet Hereafter exists not only between its three media forms, but within each form as well.

In fact, when we move between the three forms of The Sweet Hereafter, those qualities in each form that may at first seem most specifically “novelistic,” “cinematic,” or “digital,” come to feel forever reshuffled. When Banks reaches the point in Dolores's narration where she recounts the bus's chaotic descent from the
roadway, he concludes her chapter and begins a new chapter narrated by Billy Ansel, the father of two children killed on the bus who happens to be driving behind Dolores that morning and thus witnesses the accident firsthand. This apparent “cut” from Dolores’s point of view on the accident to Billy’s point of view actually comes to resemble, in light of Egoyan’s film, something closer to a “dissolve,” a smoothly shared transition between their two perspectives. And in light of the DVD audio commentary featuring both Egoyan and Banks, this same moment resists categorization into either Dolores’s or Billy’s point of view. The resulting constellation of resonances within and between the three forms of The Sweet Hereafter suggests what the horizon of intermediated spectatorship may potentially encompass, especially in terms of questions posed to the experience of vision as a matter of point of view.

To illustrate this intermediated network more fully and to weigh its implications for issues of spectatorship, I will analyze two different versions of the same brief sequence from Egoyan’s film—a sequence that corresponds to this particular moment I have just described in Banks’s novel.61 The first version of the sequence (which I refer to as “clip 1”) does not include the DVD audio commentary, while the second version (“clip 2”) does.

Clip 1 begins by signaling its reliance on Dolores (Gabrielle Rose). As in the novel, it is her first-person voice-over that seems to authorize the images we see; her words reconstruct events from her morning bus route, and the images appear to illustrate her words. This sense of seeing what Dolores remembers is underlined by the fact that she is speaking to the lawyer Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm), a man who, of course, wants Dolores to recall these events to the best of her ability. Although we do not catch a glimpse of Mitchell in this particular sequence, his presence in Dolores’s home has been established earlier, and we are reminded of his proximity when Dolores interrupts her narrative to make asides about her perceptions of the boy Sean Walker (Devon Finn) and her bewilderment at the idea of having one of “those mornings,” as Sean’s mother Risa (Alberta Watson) puts it to her. Egoyan cuts to Dolores in close-up for these asides, enacting a visual shift in time and space that reemphasizes her as the source in the present of these recalled images. The second close-up transforms, without a cut, into a tilt upwards that moves from Dolores to the photographs of the school bus children on the wall behind her. Here, the unusual camera movement within the frame, blurred focus, and eventual dissolve to the children on the bus that Dolores mentions in her last, choked words provide a number of conventional indicators of the cinematic flashback.

But why signal a flashback for Dolores when the point of view from her memory has already been established? The film seems to suggest, at least at first, that it is not necessarily the point of view that has now changed, but that the affect of Dolores’s memory has entered a different register. After all, she has now reached the point in her narrative where routine ends and trauma begins, so it makes sense that the dissolve fades to reveal the children on the bus in a slow tracking shot, as if Dolores is savoring one last, loving glimpse of the faces she will never see alive.
again. In fact, Egoyan cuts to a shot of Dolores at the wheel, looking toward the back of the bus through her mirror in a manner that seems to substantiate the rearview perspective and motion of the previous tracking shot.

As the sequence continues, however, this tracking shot begins to look less like a continuation of Dolores's perspective and more of a bridge to the point of view of Billy (Bruce Greenwood). Billy's two children stand at the very back of the bus, at the limit of Dolores's domain, but they are the center of Billy's field of vision as he waves to them from his pickup truck. The spatial smoothness of this transition between perspectives, which is only enhanced by the aerial shot that clearly locates Billy's truck behind Dolores's bus and the graphic match between shots of Billy's kids waving and Billy himself waving, works very differently than the abrupt switch between chapters in Banks's novel. In the novel, the unspeakable violence of the accident inhabits the blank space between the chapters as a radical discontinuity. In the film, the accident emerges, with no diminishment of its horror, as a matter of shared experience, of relayed lines of perception between Dolores and Billy. When she can no longer see, he is able to see for her. Or, to put it in terms that deliberately mix media forms, the film presents a dissolve between points of view while the novel presents a cut.

But to think through The Sweet Hereafter as an intermediated text, and not merely a source novel and a film adaptation, means to trace these resonances between the forms in multiple directions. For example, the film's "dissolve" urges us to return to the novel's "cut," to search for a continuity we may have missed when reading. This continuity does indeed exist in Banks's novel, but may become fully visible only in light of Egoyan's film. For what Dolores and Billy share in the novel is not the film's sense of intertwined vision, but intertwined blindness. Dolores's mysterious "afterimage" of the dog that prevents her from seeing the road in front of her is echoed by Billy's admission that, at the same moment, he was not truly looking at the bus in front of him but fantasizing about his lover, Risa Walker. To quote Billy's voice in the novel: "My truck was right behind the bus when it went over, and my body was driving my truck, and one hand was on the steering wheel and the other was waving at Jessica and Mason, who were aboard the bus and waving back at me from the rear window—but my eyes were looking at Risa Walker's breasts and hips cast in a hazy neon glow through the slats of the venetian blind in Room 11 of the Bide-a-Wile."\(^{62}\)

Billy's language, with its emphasis on visual fantasy and voyeuristic desire, evokes cinema and photography at least as powerfully as Dolores's language of "optical illusion" and "afterimage" to describe the dog on the road, but the film refuses to present, at least in any literal way, either of these two images. As a result, what our eyes see, as readers and viewers of The Sweet Hereafter, is an intermediated experience of vision itself that is not entirely reducible to novel or film, but that exists between them. Indeed, perhaps the most provocative aspects of this intermediated experience of vision, of its possibilities and impossibilities, are only glimpsed after seeing and hearing the DVD.
The DVD as a “Mutation of Reading.” In clip 2, which features DVD audio commentary from Egoyan and Banks over the images of clip 1, one of the most striking suggestions made by Egoyan in his commentary is that the moment I analyzed earlier as a “dissolve” in perspectives between Dolores and Billy actually represents the lawyer Mitchell Stephens “imagining” or “remembering” an event at which he was not present. Now the issue of vision grows even more complicated, moving beyond the novel’s apparent “cut” and the film’s apparent “dissolve” between points of view into a matter of memory itself as somehow exceeding first-person perspective or experience. These matters of vision and memory are at the heart of The Sweet Hereafter in both its novel and film forms, but to have the theme articulated in this way on the DVD, at this crucial juncture in the story, suggests that a vital aspect of what the novel and film propose about the relations of vision, memory, and experience may only come alive for spectators through an intermediated encounter with The Sweet Hereafter. As Banks points out in his commentary during clip 2, some readers who saw the film forged a retrospective memory of the book that did not include the incest contained in both novel and film. What new memories, experiences, and visions of The Sweet Hereafter are opened up or shut down for viewers and readers through the DVD’s digital interfaces?

One way to reply to such a question involves considering just what it means when Egoyan describes, in his audio commentary at the end of clip 2, the cut from the school bus sinking in icy water to the peaceful shot of a family nestled in bed as “shocking.” For Egoyan, the shock stems from the stark differences between

Figure 3. Billy Ansel (Bruce Greenwood), witness to tragedy in Atom Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter (Fine Line Features, 1997).
the two images—the contrast between death at its most unrelenting and life at its most comforting. But shock arising from the collision of these two shots is only one sensation viewers experience at this moment. Another is a sense of recognition based on the *familiarity* of the image of the family. For it is this image that not only begins the film but also adorns the promotional movie posters, the cover of the tie-in paperback edition, and the outer case of the DVD. This is a moving image that reminds us of its intermediated textuality, of the various double lives it leads as a still pressured to convey the substance of *The Sweet Hereafter* to the public. In this sense, it is also an image that foregrounds Barthes’s claim in “The Third Meaning” that the film still is not a random “sample” from the film but a significant “quotation” of the film (TM 67).

For Barthes, the quotation represented by the film still is not merely an extract from the original film text; it signals an “other text” called the filmic, located between film and photograph, whose reading requires “a veritable mutation of reading and its object, text or film” (TM 68). Perhaps another way to describe this mutation would be the movement from the “readerly” to the “writerly” text articulated so influentially by Barthes in *S/Z* (1970), a study published the same year as “The Third Meaning.” *S/Z*, a pioneering investigation into the nature of reading centered on a close analysis of Honoré de Balzac’s short story “Sarrasine” (1830), posits the readerly text as the kind of literary text with which we are most familiar—a text that neatly separates the roles of the author as producer of the text and the reader as consumer of the text. In a writerly text, on the other hand, the reader is “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.” A writerly text is very rarely an actual book or story, but rather a certain quality (like the filmic) reached “by accident, fleetingly, obliquely in certain limit-works.” Barthes explains his “step-by-step” method of analyzing “Sarrasine” as a way of respecting the writerly, of resisting attempts to force the writerly text into the structured orders of interpretation characteristic of the readerly text. Perhaps not surprisingly, he describes the “step-by-step” method through a metaphoric language of intermediation between cinema and literature that recalls “The Third Meaning” and its positioning between cinema and photography: the method is “never anything but the decomposition (in the cinematographic sense) of the work of reading: a slow motion, so to speak, neither wholly image nor wholly analysis.” And again, as in “The Third Meaning,” Barthes’s sense of intermediated meaning remains aligned with surrealism: Barthes’s definition of the writerly, as well as his selection of “Sarrasine” as his chosen object of analysis, is inspired explicitly by Bataille. It is Bataille’s selection of “Sarrasine” as one of those rare (writerly?) literary works that capture how “only suffocating, impossible trial provides the author with the means of attaining the distant vision the reader is seeking” that aids Barthes in choosing the text for *S/Z*.

Does the audio commentary on *The Sweet Hereafter* DVD constitute a readerly or writerly addition to the cinematic text? If the writerly aims to disturb conventional structures of textual authority to make room for a reader who produces a text rather than simply consuming it, then the audio commentary seems to do...
just the opposite—it reasserts the author’s voice, not the reader’s, as producer of meaning. Or does it? In “The Death of the Author” (1968), an essay closely related to S/Z, Barthes traces those rare but significant moments in modern literature when the primacy of the author as locus of textual meaning has been challenged. One of these moments is surrealism. According to Barthes, surrealism “contributed to the desacralization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist ‘jolt’), by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of several people writing together.”

The audio commentary of The Sweet Hereafter may well deliver the voice of the author to the viewer directly, but it is the dual voice of Egoyan and Banks talking together. This voice, like the multiply authored surrealist projects referred to by Barthes, reminds us of authorship’s plural, rather than unified nature—it presents the authorship of The Sweet Hereafter as collaborative and intermediated, as well as an ongoing process of conversation. At times, the substance of this conversation seems to exclude the viewer by positing Egoyan and Banks as the only true authors of The Sweet Hereafter, the only ones with the knowledge and authority to speak over its images. But at other times, the commentary seems to invite viewers to imagine themselves as participants in the making of The Sweet Hereafter; perhaps not in the sense of cowriting the novel with Banks or codirecting the film with Egoyan, but rather in the sense of shaping the digital afterlife of The Sweet Hereafter as an intermediated text irreducible to either pure literature or pure cinema. In other words, The Sweet Hereafter DVD, as a new media text in its own right that is simultaneously dependent on the horizons of its literary and cinematic incarnations, contains at least the potential to move from readerly text to writerly text through strategies of viewer engagement not unlike those of surrealism.

For example, consider the moment when Egoyan, in his audio commentary near the film’s conclusion, discusses what he finds most exciting about working in the medium of cinema. He mentions film’s ability to generate spaces where the viewers can “drift, creating their own strands of narrative.” Shortly thereafter, Banks interrupts Egoyan to respond directly to the images onscreen. Banks notes how Egoyan’s juxtaposition of two different gestures by Mitchell Stephens (first hiding his face in his hands in an outburst of grief, then donning his glasses to take in the unexpected presence of Dolores Driscoll, who is now working happily as an airport shuttle bus driver several years after the accident) gives the sense of movement from blindness to sight in terms of Mitchell’s ability to perceive himself through the eyes of others. Egoyan calls Banks’s reading “beautiful,” particularly in how it captures that very sense of “drift” possible for the viewer, beyond and between the director’s design of the film—Egoyan reveals that the first in the set of two gestures Banks responds to was not the result of his own planning, but of the actor Ian Holm’s suggestion during filming. In other words, Banks, now functioning much more as the voice of a viewer than an author, unmasks the text as something.
more than a unilateral exchange between a director who produces meaning and a viewer who consumes it; Banks “drifts” with the film in ways that Egoyan could not anticipate.

Moments in the audio commentary such as this one, where Egoyan’s authorial voice is interrupted by Banks’s articulation of his experience as a spectator and Egoyan, in turn, admits the limitations of his own influence over the film’s meaning and celebrates the film made by the viewer, invite a writerly engagement with The Sweet Hereafter. Granted, these “writerly” moments are the exception to the norm of a more “readerly” tone in the audio commentary, where Egoyan tends to dominate discussion with his own interpretations of the events onscreen. Still, these instants of the writerly do exist, and, in certain ways, the new media format of the DVD makes room for viewers to extend such moments and create others on their own. For example, the scene index feature allows viewers to see the film as a series of 21 chapters, each with its own title and an accompanying still taken from that chapter. On the one hand, the scene index allows Egoyan to impose his own version of the film’s meaning on viewers by isolating and clarifying those elements in each chapter that are most crucial in shaping the desired viewer response to the film. So the introduction of the incestuous relationship between Nicole Burnell (Sarah Polley) and her father, Sam (Tom McCamus), is given in the chapter entitled “The Pied Piper” and its accompanying still of Nicole and Sam sharing a romantic kiss. This chapter’s still mirrors two similar stills in the scene index that also feature Nicole and Sam together, one for the chapter entitled “Fathers and Daughters” and the other for “Sam and Nicole.” These chapter titles and their stills seem designed to counteract the confusion and/or denial on the part of some viewers, discussed by both Egoyan and Banks in the audio commentary, to understand this relationship as father-daughter incest.

On the other hand, the DVD includes a number of tools that could conceivably aid viewers in challenging Egoyan’s interpretations or pursuing readings of their own. For instance, although Egoyan asserts a number of times in his audio commentary how closely Robert Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” resembles the events portrayed in the film, studying the poem in the page-by-page illustrated format available on the DVD exposes viewers not only to the relevant passages quoted within the film, but to the many passages absent from the film that may undermine Egoyan’s assertion. Similarly, the brief interviews with cast members appended to their biographies and filmographies on the DVD sometimes highlight aspects of their characters that Egoyan minimizes or inflects differently in his own commentary. But most importantly, by having Banks featured so prominently in both the audio commentary and in the “Before and After The Sweet Hereafter” panel discussion, the DVD invites viewers to stage their own versions of The Sweet Hereafter as an intermediated encounter between novel, film, and DVD. Such encounters will utilize the literary, cinematic, and new media incarnations of The Sweet Hereafter as launching pads, but the texts viewers create between these forms may conceivably have the potential to “enlarge” The Sweet Hereafter in a variation on
the surrealist sense of that term, as unexpected encounters in the borderlands traversing film and spectator. Of course, *The Sweet Hereafter* DVD encourages such encounters to occur in the realms of rational meaning and commodity consumption made most easily available by the DVD’s design, rather than within surreality. But lodged inside the networks of intermediation established by *The Sweet Hereafter* in its digital form reside tools for viewer-assembled texts that may well be marked by that “veritable mutation of reading and its object” that Barthes called “the filmic.” Or perhaps these texts may move toward that impossible beginning/ending of cinema Bazin imagined as the myth of total cinema’s fulfillment, when spectator desire for the ideal medium matches the actual medium’s existing capabilities. But just what will these new, intermediated texts produced by viewers look like?

*Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (2004), a book coedited by Egoyan and Ian Balfour, includes a chapter on *The Sweet Hereafter* coauthored by Egoyan and Banks that may begin to answer this question. The chapter opens with Egoyan’s description of “two formative subtitles experiences.”68 One of these experiences involves Egoyan’s accidental encounter with his own film as a viewer: while preparing for a lecture, Egoyan mistakenly accesses the DVD function that presents *The Sweet Hereafter* with English subtitles for the hearing impaired. This surprising experience of seeing the film from a new perspective inspires Egoyan to review the publicity photographs taken by Johnnie Eisen during the film’s production, particularly those portraits of actors posing in character and looking directly into the camera lens. Egoyan then sends these stills to Banks and asks him to subtitle them—to select passages from his source novel to accompany the stills. The chapter concludes with this series of publicity stills featuring Banks’s subtitles, with notes that reproduce the longer passages from which Banks selected his shorter subtitles.

When Egoyan describes this striking gallery of stills as “subtitles to an alternate version of the film,”69 one cannot help but hear the echoes of Bazin, Barthes, and, perhaps most of all, Breton. It was Breton, after all, who valued cinema above all else for its “power to disorient,” for its “lyrical substance simply begging to be hauled in en masse, with the aid of chance.”70 In the end, perhaps this alternate version of *The Sweet Hereafter*, discovered through a disorienting, chance encounter with new media and assembled through intermediation, offers a surrealist glimpse of cinema’s elusive “lyrical substance.” Such glimpses may remind us of the surrealist essence of cinema, even now (and especially now) that the very concept of what “cinema” was, is, and could be seems harder to describe than ever before.

Notes

For their advice and encouragement, I would like to thank Richard Allen, Dudley Andrew, John Belton, Phil Watts, the two anonymous *Cinema Journal* reviewers, and Irina Reyn. I am also grateful to audiences at a 2005 meeting of the Pittsburgh Film Colloquium and the 2005 and 2006 conferences of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, where I presented early versions of this essay, as well as to the Howard Foundation, which awarded me a 2005–2006 fellowship that enabled me to pursue this research.


11. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, 9–16, 15. Further references will be noted by the prefix OP and the page number inserted parenthetically.

12. For a discussion of how subjectivity and objectivity are intertwined in Bazin’s thought, see Philip Rosen, “History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin,” in Margulies, ed., *Rites of Realism*, 42–79.


15. The subject of surrealism and politics is a vast one that cannot be treated in this essay in any detail, although I touch upon it later in the discussion of Georges Bataille. For an introduction to this terrain, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988). For an example of surrealist politics applied to a cinematic context, see my “History Without a Face: Surrealism, Modernity, and the Holocaust in the Cinema of Georges Franju,” *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17–53.
16. Sartre refers to “the structure of the image” as “irrational.” See The Imaginary, 24. Formulations such as this one, along with Sartre’s thoughtful attention to dreams and various hypnagogic states, gives The Imaginary a certain proximity to surrealism that Sartre’s later work will not share. See, for example, Sartre’s searing critique of surrealism in “What is Literature?” (1948), included in Sartre, What is Literature? and Other Essays, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21–245, esp. 152–58. For a study of Sartre’s relation to surrealism, see William Plank, Sartre and Surrealism (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981). On the subject of surrealism, as well as Sartre’s importance for Bazin and Barthes, it is worth noting that Sartre comes closest to making an exception to his divisions between perception and imagination when he admits that certain “image-portraits,” such as paintings or photographs of actual persons, sometimes seem to offer an “irrational synthesis” of presence and absence for the viewer. See The Imaginary, 23, and compare Barthes’s related quotation of Sartre in Camera Lucida (CL 19–20; quoting The Imaginary, 24–25).


18. Note how Bazin’s formulation here again evokes Sartre in order to challenge him, this time recalling Sartre’s refutation of Hippolyte Taine’s assertion that “perception is already ‘a true hallucination.’” See The Imaginary, 148.


20. Andrew, André Bazin, 58. Andrew dates Bazin’s most intensive involvement with surrealism to the early 1940s, the very same era that Bazin was at work on the ideas that would structure “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.”

21. However, recent developments in film studies suggest an increasing willingness to challenge this conventional reading of Bazin. For illuminating examples of this trend (both published after this essay was already completed), see Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” Critical Inquiry 32.3 (Spring 2006): 443–81; and Christian Keathley, “André Bazin and the Revelatory Potential of Cinema,” Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 54–81.


28. What has been lost, however, in Barthes’s transition from “The Photographic Message” to Camera Lucida is a willingness to analyze the photograph as a social text. Camera Lucida brackets the social in favor of the personal, as explained more fully below in Barthes’s distinctions between the studium and the punctum.

30. For a valuable account of the influence of Barthes’s distinction, particularly in terms of its wide-ranging implications for art history, see Michael Fried, “Barthes’s Punctum,” Critical Inquiry 31.3 (Spring 2005): 539–74.
33. Ferry, “Concerning King Kong,” 164.
39. The Surrealist Group, “Data Toward the Irrational Enlargement of a Film,” 121.
41. Breton, “As in a Wood,” 75.
42. Breton, “As in a Wood,” 73. It is worth noting, if only in passing, how Breton’s account of surrealist spectatorship anticipates certain aspects of the “resistant” or “oppositional” spectator constructed by cultural studies discourse; for a particularly influential example of cultural studies spectatorship, see Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in Culture, Media, Language, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (1980; London: Routledge, 1996), 125–38. One major difference that distinguishes the two spectatorship models is that whereas surrealism favors the shared fantasies forged between spectator and text, cultural studies tends to favor clearly delineated distinctions that separate the text’s ideological “encoding” from the spectator’s “decoding” of the text’s messages.
43. But see also Barthes’s brief references to Godard, Antonioni, and especially Fellini (CL 70, 85, 115–16)—these moments underline the extent to which cinema, however marginalized in Camera Lucida, is never forgotten.
44. Although the analysis that follows focuses solely on “The Third Meaning,” it is also informed by two related essays on cinema written by Barthes during the same period. See Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” (1973), Image-Music-Text, 69–78; and “Leaving the Movie Theater” (1975), The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 345–49.
45. Unfortunately, Barthes makes no clear distinction between publicity stills and frame enlargements when discussing the “photogram”; distinguishing these two forms may
well have altered Barthes's account of "the filmic." I am indebted to John Belton for calling this issue to my attention.

46. Compare Bazin on *Ivan the Terrible*, where he notes the film's "rather static" style but asserts that "it would be wrong to say that the film is nothing more than an album of artistic photographs." Perhaps an inspiration for Barthes's sense of "the filmic"? See André Bazin, "Battle of the Rails and Ivan the Terrible," *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo, trans. Alain Piette and Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 197–203, 201.


61. This sequence can be found on The Sweet Hereafter DVD as chapter 11, “That Morning.”


67. See The Sweet Hereafter DVD, chapter 20, “The Sweet Hereafter.”


70. Breton, “As in a Wood,” 73 (emphasis in the original).