

No-Belief Empathy in Film

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I. Introduction

A primary component of our engagement with narrative fiction film is the way we respond emotionally to characters. We regularly praise films for being engaging, and when we do, we are often judging that a film has made us care about its characters. Similarly, we may judge the success with which a film develops a certain character by gauging our responsiveness to her. Apart from having an affective component, film engagement is widely assumed to be instructive. Films can be said to transport us imaginatively to different time periods and cultures; they allow us to observe forms of behavior and ways of life with which we might have no other contact; and they can illustrate a range of typical responses to particular kinds of event—say, the loss of a loved one—which we may not have experienced. Engaging narrative fiction films can do all this and more, even though they are fictional. But there is nothing unique to film in this kind of instruction: any representational art work can potentially enrich our life-experience, at least fictionally or imaginatively. In addition, there is no obvious connection between this kind of instruction and our responsiveness to film characters. Imagining far-off places and different ways of life may seem to have little to do with pitying a character or coming to share her fear. Nevertheless, the question of whether our responses to film characters can be instructive because they involve certain kinds of imaginings is at the heart of the debate about the role of empathy in film.

Empathy designates one of two classes of emotions felt toward fictional characters. The other is the class of sympathetic emotions. Roughly speaking, empathy involves sharing or replicating a character's emotion whereas sympathy involves responding to the character with a different emotion. It is generally agreed that, if we can have any kind of emotions toward what we know to be fictional, then we have sympathetic responses to film characters. When I am imaginatively caught up in the fictional events of a film, I can respond out of concern for a character. Moreover, since my response involves certain beliefs about the character's situation and reveals my attitude toward her, it can be instructive—in the same way that imagining different experiences and ways of life can be instructive. Although the precise conditions and forms of sympathy still have to be worked out, this much is clear. In contrast, there is very little agreement among film theorists and philosophers about the role empathy plays in film engagement. One reason for this is that empathy is regularly conflated with the kind of imaginative activity it is thought to involve, namely identification. There is a great deal of skepticism about identification which has tended to carry over to empathy. Cognitive film theorists and philosophers regard the notion of identification with suspicion because of its historical association with the psycho-semiotic model of film analysis. On this model, identification is a product of psychoanalysis, which casts the viewer as a self-involved voyeur, and has nothing to do with responding to characters. Even when the notion of identification is separated from such an unpopular model of film analysis, and treated as a particular kind of imaginative activity, it is still held suspect. It is thought

that identification is not something that actually occurs in film engagement because it involves the impossible, namely imagining being someone else.

Given these suspicions, it is tempting to analyze empathy separately from identification. But here lies another source of disagreement: the problem of how one can share another's emotion without imagining being the other. Without identification it is difficult to explain how a viewer can come to have the same emotion as a fictional character in virtue of the character having that emotion. The fact that the viewer and the character occupy different epistemic positions in relation to fictional events would seem to rule out empathy unless the viewer could project himself imaginatively into the character's situation.

With or without identification, then, empathy is a problematic notion. Even if one can settle on an account of how empathy occurs, there is the further problem of accounting for its value. It is unclear to many how a mere replication of a character's emotion could contribute to an understanding of fictional events. Such a response would not involve the viewer's own beliefs about the character's situation nor would it reveal her attitude toward the character. Recently, however, attempts have been made to show that a shared emotion can be instructive because it involves imaginatively taking up a new perspective on events.¹ In other words, coming to share a character's response gives one access to a different set of attitudes than one's own. This view draws upon a refined account of identification insofar as it assumes that empathy involves a particular kind of imagining. It is at this point that I enter the debate. I want to build on recent attempts to

rescue empathy in film by using a particular theory of emotion to explain how empathy can be instructive.

The theory of emotion I use emphasizes the way focus and attention distinguish the role of emotions in rational life. I call it the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotion because it describes emotions as ways of interpreting, construing or 'seeing' the world in terms of value. In particular cases, this amounts to attention to an aspect of the object of an emotion as it is significant to the subject. Though I do not mount a full defense of the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotion here, some of its attractions can be noted. It is able to explain the full range and diversity of emotions in a way that does not reduce them to other mental or bodily states. It is able to distinguish between the more subtle emotions. And it allows for different levels of social, biological and psychological determination between the emotions. A further attraction of the theory bears directly upon the debate about empathy in film. The cognitive-perceptual theory of emotion can just as easily accommodate emotions felt toward fictional entities as it can emotions felt toward real things. This is because it is not the kind of cognitive theory which requires that emotions involve beliefs about their objects.

On the cognitive-perceptual account, a certain kind of instruction is already built into emotional experience since it involves coming to see the world in a certain way. In the case of empathy, this kind of instruction can take two forms: 1) While imaginatively caught up with a character, you may come to share her emotion and thus her way of seeing the world. As soon as you are no longer so caught up, however, the response you briefly shared may seem so foreign, and indeed, inappropriate, to you that it cannot

represent a real-life option of response. Even though you distance yourself from the shared emotional experience had during the film, you have still learnt that there is this other way of seeing the world, this other way of interpreting the significance of a kind of situation. 2) Sometimes, however, you do not reject the emotional perspective you briefly shared with a film character. Rather, you take on board the new way of seeing as part of your engagement with the film. The second kind of emotional learning is comparable to the kind of perceptual training that art students often undergo in order to improve their ability to depict things in accurate detail. So the form of instruction that empathy takes depends on whether one integrates the new way of seeing into one's emotional repertoire.

In what follows I go into more detail about the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotions and illustrate emotional learning with particular film examples. I also review ways in which the notion of identification has been refined so as to reflect the fact that films direct our imaginings and these imaginings support emotional responses to characters. Apart from there being a greater historical need to defend empathy than sympathy in film, the reason I focus on empathy is because of its particular cognitive importance. Whereas sympathetic responses to characters reveal the way we already value things or the way we place significance, empathetic responses reveal new ways of valuing or placing significance. It is important to understand what this means: it is not just that empathy supports an instructive change in our beliefs or attitudes, but that empathy is itself instructive. This point is what separates my view from other views about the value of empathy. Ultimately my view supports the intuition that a good film

which warrants my responsive and imaginative engagement may not only increase my understanding of ways of seeing the world, but change my way of seeing the world.

II. The Cognitive-Perceptual Theory of Emotion

Beyond its application to film theory, the principal recommendation for the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotions is that it can tell us what kind of thing an emotion would have to be for all the commonly accepted 'facts' about emotions to be true. These facts about emotions include that they are usually felt; that they are intentional; that we often identify them by physiological changes; that they commonly involve believing some state of affairs to obtain; that they can motivate and thus explain action; that they are only ever partly subject to rational control; and that they are experienced as unified states of mind.² All of these claims may not be true of every emotion. But different subsets of them are true of every emotion. To take a standard example to which all the facts seem to apply, my anger at you is partly identified by feelings of agitation; it takes you as its object; it is the result of my having come to believe that you have wronged me in some way. In my anger, I may strike out or start plotting revenge. If I discover that, in fact, you have not wronged me, it may still take some time for me to shake off my angry feeling and its resultant urges.

Traditional theories of emotion take a particular aspect of emotions to be essential and leave out others. They focus on the sensory, physiological, behavioral, cognitive, strategic or social phenomena that typically correspond to an emotion. In so doing, they limit their ability to distinguish the full range of emotions and the full range of cases of emotional arousal. Some more recent theories focus on more than one aspect

of an emotion. For example, on one kind of theory an emotion is a cognition accompanied by a feeling.³ There are then different ways of describing the relation between the cognitive and affective components of an emotion. The worry remains, however, that any theory which breaks an emotion down into its components is unable to account for the fact that we experience emotions as unified states of mind. A further, and perhaps deeper, worry which applies to most traditional theories of emotion is that, in describing aspects of emotional experience, one fails to get at what an emotion really is. Robert Solomon makes the point in saying, '[f]eelings, physiology and behavior, along with the social circumstances, all fit into the portrait of emotion, but what, nevertheless, seems missing is the emotion.'⁴

In order to locate a unified emotion among its various aspects, perhaps a new approach is needed. Rather than focusing on what the experience of an emotion is like, why not focus on what emotions can do for us? The cognitive-perceptual account stresses the interpretive function of emotions. There are several proponents of this kind of account. Robert C. Roberts argues that emotions are 'concern-imbued construals.'⁵ Ronald de Sousa describes emotions as 'patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies.'⁶ Patricia Greenspan is interested in the way emotions focus our attention on a subset of the perceptual evidence in order to motivate action.⁷ And Amelié Rorty offers an explanation of akratic emotions in terms of 'pattern[s] of discrimination and attention.'⁸

Roberts argues that all the commonly accepted facts about emotions apply because emotions are a unique kind of state, not reducible to any other intentional state,

qualitative experience or bodily phenomenon. As such, emotions have a distinct rational function in terms of which their value and success is determined. While a belief or judgment may accompany an emotion, it does not define that emotion. When a belief is involved in an emotion, it merely provides the terms for the overall construal. A construal is 'a mental event or state in which one thing is grasped in terms of something else.'⁹ Roberts compares emotional experience to another kind of experience which involves construal—the experience of 'seeing-as,' famously illustrated by Wittgenstein with the duck-rabbit figure. Roberts claims that seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck is not merely knowing that it can be seen as a duck, nor merely judging that it can be so seen, but construing it as such.

Construing seems to involve dwelling on or attending to, or at minimum holding onto, some aspect, for example, the duckiness of the duck-rabbit....It seems to mean bringing some perceived paradigm, or some concept or image or thought, *to bear.*'

In both the case of emotion and the case of seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck, it is to bring some thing experientially to bear.¹⁰ What distinguishes emotional construals from other kinds of construal is that they have concern as one of their terms and the appearance of truth for their subjects. So, for example, in order to be angry at someone, I need to construe her as having culpably offended. And in order to construe her in this way I need to care about some dimension of her offense.¹¹

If Roberts' account of emotional construal establishes that emotions have an interpretive function, de Sousa tells us why this function is important. He gives emotions a crucial role in 'guiding the processes of reasoning.' In order for us to form

beliefs and desires, we need a way of focusing on a subset of the information presented to us in any situation. De Sousa argues that emotions can do this for us. An emotional response to a situation immediately marks out what is significant about that situation for the subject. Say someone responds with appropriate fear when she is confronted by a ferocious bear. Insofar as her fear involves ascribing the quality of fearsomeness to her situation, her attention is going to be directed to what makes her situation fearsome, namely the looming presence of a ferocious bear. With this she has a grasp on the significant information to take into account about her situation. This allows her to judge her situation in certain ways, form desires and decide what to do.¹²

While the value that emotions reveal will not always be of the narrowly ethical kind, our ability to see the real significance of things has great ethical import. The value of our activities, inclinations, and aspirations is going to depend on whether they manifest an accurate perception of axiological reality. The Aristotelian injunction to feel the right emotion, at the right time and in the right amount reflects this fact. Virtue of character, which determines virtuous action, depends on the appropriateness of one's emotional responses. To put it another way, emotional authenticity is integral to Aristotelian *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which combines sound judgment with virtuous character. Amélie Rorty explains this point in the following way.

Although *phronesis* is a set of dispositions to draw well-formed, truth-bound inferences about the vagaries and uncertainties of particular situations, it is also expressed within the most minute habits of rightly ordered salience, habits of perception and interpretation, classification and inventiveness. The man of practical wisdom, magnetized toward appropriate ends, sees what should be seen, desires what is worth desiring, finds solutions to what appear to be

intractable problems: he deliberates in such a way as to form well-ordered actions.¹³

Virtuous action depends, not only on reasons, but also on the manner in which a person acts. And the manner in which a person acts reveals the emotions which guided the forming of good reasons in the first place. Thus on the cognitive-perceptual account, emotions can provide insight of a broadly ethical kind into our ways of seeing the world in terms of value. For the same reasons, emotions felt with and for film characters can provide insight.

III. Emotion without Belief

Given that a construal is not a belief, the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotion is not threatened by the occurrence of emotions without belief. The fact that it is commonly the case that a change in belief affects a change in emotion has been taken to support the claim that emotions involve beliefs in their propositional content. My anger at you involves the belief that you have wronged me unjustly. If I discover that, in fact, you have not wronged me, my anger dissipates. Or at least it should. But what if my anger fails to dissipate? I am still having an emotion even if it is irrational or inappropriate, something that a standard cognitive theory cannot account for. There are, in fact, more instances of this kind of case than a cognitivist would like to admit. Often when we have conflicting emotions or recalcitrant emotions, the requisite belief is missing. Even more notably, every instance of an emotion had toward a fictional object is missing a belief in an actual state of affairs.

Although it is important to note the standard connection between emotion and belief, it is equally important for a representative theory of emotion to note when this connection is not there. So, for example, Rorty describes the case of Jonah's lingering resentment toward his boss Esther even after he has dropped the belief that she is a petty tyrant. The resentment lingers as long as his habit of interpreting certain kinds of situation in certain ways remains entrenched.¹⁴ This is clearly a case of an irrational or inappropriate emotion even if it is still a case of genuine emotion. There are, however, also cases of appropriate emotions without appropriate belief. Greenspan describes a case of having 'mixed feelings' over losing out to a friend on a promotion. You are both happy and unhappy that your friend received the promotion. But you may firmly hold the belief that, all things considered, it's a good thing that your friend got it rather than you. The best explanation for this, Greenspan suggests, is that contrary emotions are not contrary in the same way as beliefs. Contrary emotions involve clashing or overlapping construals of one's situation and require a shift in one's focus from one subset of the perceptual evidence to another subset.¹⁵

To these unusual real-life cases, we can add the case of our responses to fiction. When I pity Anna Karenina, I do not believe that there is a real someone who is really suffering. This is puzzling if one insists upon the belief component of emotions. In the context of cognitive theories of emotion, there is a familiar and long-standing skepticism about the possibility of our experiencing genuine emotions toward fictions and thus making sense of our engagement with fictions. But if the only reason for describing emotions felt toward fictions as inauthentic or irrational is that they do not involve some

kind of belief about their objects, then the above cases of emotional recalcitrance and ambivalence show that this is not sufficient reason to deny that we can have genuine emotions towards fictions.

In any case, the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotions effectively sidesteps any problem of our feeling for fictional characters because it does not make beliefs about the object a component of the emotion. Emotions are distinct from beliefs and judgments in their interpretive function and presumably they can fulfill this function in fiction as well as in real life. My pity for Anna Karenina could establish the significance that, not only the character, but a certain kind of person in a certain kind of situation has for me. Perceived significance crosses over, so to speak, from the fictional world to the real world.

Support for the claim that we can experience real emotions toward fictions can be derived from an analysis of the phenomenon of empathy. Whether the person with whom we come to empathize is real or fictional, the process involved needs explaining. Since the process is arguably the same in the case of real life and in the case of fiction, someone who claims that empathetic responses in real life are real must also allow for the possibility of feeling real emotions toward fictions. However, some theorists deny that empathetic emotions, whether shared with real people or with fictional characters, are ever real. They argue that an empathetic response is always merely a simulation of someone else's response.¹⁶ The process of simulation is assumed to involve an act of imagination. But the fact that our responses to fiction involve an act of imagination does not mean that those responses involve merely imagined emotions.¹⁷ One can hold that

empathetic responses depend on imagination but are nevertheless real.¹⁸ And in fact an examination of the nature of the imaginative act involved in empathy supports this claim.

IV. Empathy and Identification

As noted above, empathetic and sympathetic responses are distinguished by whether they are the same as or different from the character's response. But it is not enough for empathy that you and I happen to have the same response to the same object. In order for my response to be empathetic, I must feel as I do *because* you feel as you do. In other words, there has to be some kind of relationship between the psychological states of two people in order for the response of one to the other to be characterized as empathetic.¹⁹ Another way of marking the distinction between empathy and sympathy is in terms of the different modes of imagining that they involve.

According to Richard Wollheim, sympathy involves acentral imagining: imagining *that* a character thinks and feels a certain way. Empathy, on the other hand, involves central imagining: imagining thinking and feeling *as* the character does.²⁰ That sympathy involves imagining is not always acknowledged. But what Wollheim calls central imagination is commonly called identification. Empathy and identification are not the same thing, since identification as an imaginative process need not involve emotion. Identification fosters empathy, which in turn fosters sympathy. The fact that we more commonly talk about identification in relation to fiction film than in relation to literary fiction, even though we claim to feel with and for literary characters, implies that

identification is distinct from or perhaps more complex than either sympathy or empathy.

Identification involves imagining being in a character's situation and possessing a relevant set of her properties. It need not involve imagining the impossible, namely that the character is you.²¹ As well, it need not involve full and symmetrical duplication of mental states. Berys Gaut suggests that identification is necessarily aspectual because we can only ever imagine possessing a limited number of a character's properties. The kind of properties we imagine possessing determines the kind of identification we achieve with a character. I can imagine perceiving what a character perceives, believing what he believes, feeling what he feels and desiring what he desires. Indeed, it seems likely that empathy, or actually having a character's emotion, first requires imagining what is involved in having that emotion.²² Thus identification is not limited to empathy. One may imagine all kinds of things in relation to a character without necessarily coming to share her emotions.

V. Empathy and Identification in Film

I have already noted the suspicion with which cognitive film theorists and philosophers of film view the notion of identification. But this suspicion is not only derived from the historical link between identification and psychoanalysis of the film spectator. It is also derived from the sloppiness with which the term 'identification' has been used in theory and in practice. One remedy to such suspicion is to throw out the term; another is to qualify its use. I suggest that the latter remedy is preferable given the resonance of the term in ordinary talk about film engagement. But even if one agrees to

keep 'identification,' one may suspect that it describes very little. For Noël Carroll, a clear sign that identification is not part of our engagement with film is that we practically never empathize with film characters. Carroll argues that viewers do not share the feelings of characters because the viewer's feelings are altruistic, and reflect a larger perspective on the (fictional) events which includes the character's fate, whereas the character's feelings are egoistic.²³ Gaut suspects that 'this objection fails to see the significance of the imaginative element involved in empathetic identification.' In order to share a character's feelings I must imaginatively come to occupy his position. Then both my feelings and the character's are self-directed, because I am imagining the character's fate befalling me.²⁴ Carroll is right that the viewer's extended knowledge of the film fiction has *some* effect on the relation between her responses and the character's: most notably, the viewer's empathetic response lacks the motivational force that the character's response, at least fictionally, has.

Though empathy and identification are not uniquely cinematic phenomena, they are supported in unique ways by cinematic devices. It is a common assumption that the point-of-view shot is the central case of cinematic identification. This assumption has been challenged on a number of fronts. Murray Smith points out that we often see the climactic sequence of events in a horror film through the eyes of the killer, someone with whom we are not expected to empathize or sympathize.²⁵ But this assumes that identification necessarily involves emotion. In the case of the horror film, the point-of-view shot can be seen to facilitate perceptual and epistemic identification with the killer. Seeing events from the killer's perspective, and knowing what he knows about the

situation, may help us imagine his murderous feelings, even though we do not share them.²⁶ In this case, identification stops before affective identification and empathy; it stops at imagining *that* the killer feels a certain way, not imagining feeling that way.

Taking this kind of criticism into account, Berys Gaut suggests that the expressive reaction shot is a more effective vehicle for empathetic identification than the point-of-view shot.²⁷ Using the example of Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*, Gaut describes a scene in which Starling is looking at the partially flayed corpse of one of Buffalo Bill's victims. Rather than being shown the corpse, the viewer is shown Starling's reaction to the corpse. Since we are expert at reading facial expressions, the shot of Starling's reaction facilitates our imagining what she is feeling. And, in general, visual evidence of how someone is feeling tends to foster both empathy and sympathy.²⁸

Empathy depends on imagining—specifically, imaginative projection—and our imaginings are restricted by what we know. Up to a point, the more I know about a character, the more likely I am to succeed in empathizing with her. This might make one think that whatever kind of fiction gives us the most information about the situation and subjective state of a character is the kind that best supports empathetic engagement. Whereas films can give us more information about the appearance of things, novels can give us more information about characters' states of mind. For example, it would seem impossible for a film—even one which relied heavily on voice-over narration—to convey as much about Marcel's delicacy of feeling as do the lengthy descriptions in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. It is perhaps surprising, then, that we are more prone to describe our engagement with films than with literary works in terms of

empathy and identification. Why is this? Alex Neill suggests that perhaps too much information about a character's situation and subjective state can impede empathetic engagement: 'We may be told so much about [a character] that we do not *need* to empathize with [her] in order to understand [her].'²⁹ Thus for empathy or affective identification to occur, there has to be some kind of balance achieved in a film between giving us too much and giving us too little of a character. Empathy depends on some prior understanding of the character but then facilitates further understanding.

VI. Empathy and Understanding

Some theorists characterize either identification or empathy in terms of a unique mode of understanding. By imaginatively placing myself in a character's situation, I gain an understanding of how things are for her. Once I have represented a character's thoughts, feelings, and desires to myself as though they were my own, I may respond with empathy. This allows me to see how the character interprets her own situation and why she acts as she does. Alex Neill illustrates this process of understanding with the example of the protagonist, Laura, in Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*. The events in the film achieve coherence in light of Laura's grief over losing a child. Unless I have experienced a similar loss to Laura's, the best way for me to make sense of her responses is by imagining the conditions under which she has them. But such a central imagining may not be enough. Neill argues that the full complexity and poignancy of *Don't Look Now* can only be grasped if we take seriously Laura's point of view through an empathetic response (based on affective identification). If we merely pity Laura for holding a delusional belief in a psychic connection with her dead child, then we miss the

significance of her husband's search for her and the effect of their shared grief. In order to understand the actions of Laura and her husband, and to appreciate the power of the story, we must see things from Laura's perspective and 'come to feel something of her horror at the loss of her child.'³⁰

Not only may we come to understand characters better through imaginative identification and empathy, we may also come to understand the appropriateness of our emotional responses based on the attitudes they manifest. Gaut suggests that this can come about in at least two different ways. First, by identifying with a character and coming to share her perspective and feelings, we may grow emotionally along with that character. This involves learning to have more appropriate emotional responses. Second, by coming to share a character's perspective and then coming to recognize the limitations of that perspective, we may grow emotionally even when the character does not. Such growth is facilitated by the additional force involved in having to reject attitudes which have become our own through identification.³¹ Gaut illustrates the first mode of learning with Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, and the second mode of learning with Max Ophuls' *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

In the case of *The Crying Game*, we identify with the character Fergus such that when he comes to accept his love for the transgendered character Dil we are encouraged to accept it too. In other words, our identification with Fergus leads us to question and then change our own attitudes toward homosexuality.³² In the case of *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*, even though we are encouraged to identify with the character Lisa and her idealistic interpretation of romantic love, we are also provided with evidence as to

the distorted nature of her interpretation. As a result, we learn the danger of obsessive and misdirected love. The lesson hits particularly hard, however, precisely because of our identification with Lisa. We perceive the flaws in Lisa's perspective only once we have imaginatively taken it up.

With these examples, Gaut argues that empathetic identification involves taking up different attitudes, which we may then reject. As noted above, a change in belief often, though not always, supports a change in emotion. Gaut could be suggesting that a change in emotion achieved through imaginative identification can support a change in belief just because the new emotion involves a different belief. I would like to suggest another possibility for emotional growth which does not depend on beliefs. On the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotions, an empathetic response can be insightful in and of itself whether or not it supports new beliefs. There is nothing paradoxical about adopting an emotional perspective which clashes with our beliefs given that emotions need not involve beliefs. Indeed, many examples from film, including Gaut's, show us that such a clash can be highly instructive.

VII. Empathetic Understanding

Gaut assumes that watching *The Crying Game* and identifying with its characters may lead us to change our attitudes about homosexuality. My guess is that for many viewers of the film, the process of re-education is more complex than a simple shift from not accepting to accepting homosexual love along with Fergus. Many viewers could avow their acceptance of homosexual love prior to watching the film. During the film they quickly come to identify both with Dil and with Fergus. In the scene where Fergus

and the audience discovers Dil is a man—when Dil has just finished performing oral sex on Fergus and then disrobes—viewers may share in Fergus’ immediate reaction of horror and disgust. They are likely to be ashamed of having this response but it need not show that they would have been lying if they avowed acceptance. Such a response shows that the viewers may not have shaken off an older, prejudiced way of seeing the world which doesn’t match up with their current beliefs. Gaut suggests that the viewer goes through the same process of emotional education as Fergus. But I suggest that it is a different process. Presumably Fergus would not have avowed to any prior beliefs in the acceptability of homosexual love, given his religious, cultural and political background. So Fergus’ gradual acceptance of Dil and his love for Dil is a straightforward process of changing beliefs which match up with and are manifested by changing emotions. The viewer who purports to prior open-mindedness, on the other hand, does not change beliefs so much as come face-to-face with a tension between her emotional perspective and her beliefs. The rest of the film after the ‘revelation’ scene works to help the viewer resolve this tension. In other words, by prescribing certain imaginings and emotional responses, the film works on the viewer’s deeper habits of emotional focusing or construal.

Max Ophuls’ *Letter from an Unknown Woman* seems like a more straightforward case of a change in beliefs supporting a change in emotions. The viewer shares Lisa’s emotional responses up to the point that he realizes that he does not share Lisa’s beliefs about her situation. Once he has picked up on the evidence provided by the film that Lisa has a distorted perspective on romantic love, he no longer empathizes with her.

According to Gaut, the emotional transition involves self-criticism: it is difficult and instructive because it requires dropping a perspective that the viewer has made his own through identification. In addition, I would argue that the transition is difficult in and of itself, independently of the change in beliefs. This is because it involves the viewer distancing himself from a way of seeing or construing the world that he had initially taken on board. As Roberts points out, switching construals is not always easy. Since emotional construals have concern as one of their terms and establish significance for the subject, they are particularly hard to abandon. After the point in the film when the viewer stops identifying with Lisa, his emotions will be different from hers and thus provide different interpretations of events. Nevertheless the viewer will retain the understanding gained in having had Lisa's emotional construal. Much of the force of Ophuls's film derives from the way it subtly compromises the viewer's alignment with Lisa. That this is done so effectively is due in large part to the film's support of an emotional transition involving the reinterpretation of events.

A very different example of the possibilities for emotional education involved in partial identification is David Fincher's *Fight Club*. There are two main characters in the film, Jack and Tyler, but since Jack is the narrator, it is easier to identify with him. Sometimes we see events through Jack's eyes; other times we just watch him at the center of action. We can imagine having some of Jack's beliefs and desires and we can imagine feeling as he does. For example, we can imagine experiencing his euphoria when he leaves his job after securing the continuation of his salary. We gain a sense of his excitement about forming Fight Club with his new, highly charismatic friend, Tyler.

We may even share some of this excitement. When Tyler pours lye onto Jack's, hand giving him a nasty chemical burn, we cringe and hope that Tyler will release Jack quickly and neutralize the burn (with vinegar). In this scene we are on Jack's side insofar as we don't want him to suffer but we are also likely to be drawn to the power and determination manifest in Tyler's action.

As the story progresses, the viewer begins to suspect along with Jack that Tyler is a dangerous character. What began as pranks causing minor annoyance turn into large-scale, coordinated acts of terror. Jack is no longer willing to be part of Tyler's activities, including the formation of a private militia and the manufacture of bombs. When Tyler disappears Jack embarks on a desperate cross-country journey to find and stop him. The strange thing, however, is that people respond to Jack's questions about Tyler by explaining when they last saw Jack himself. The viewer knows that Jack has never met these people. So what's going on? Depending on how quick a viewer is to pick up certain narrative clues, she may start questioning the reliability of Jack's point of view. Alternatively, she may resist the suggestion that Jack has been deceiving her and assume that Jack is the one being deceived. As it turns out, both presuppositions are correct: Jack and the viewer discover at the same moment that Jack *is* Tyler. Tyler is a persona that Jack created to overcome dissatisfaction with his own life. So what does the viewer do now? Can she still identify and empathize with Jack? If she can, is she now, as she wasn't before, also identifying with Tyler?

In the moment when Jack discovers that he is Tyler the viewer is likely to share Jack's shock and dismay. This is because her epistemic and perceptual access to events

throughout the film has been primarily limited by Jack's perspective. She is shocked and dismayed because Jack is, and she has imagined being in his situation to a large extent. However other emotions may sneak in at this point in the film, betraying an ambivalence which precedes and supports the viewer's change in beliefs about what Jack is like. The viewer may feel a slight jubilation at the discovery that Jack is Tyler or a kind of satisfaction. The jubilation is explained by the fact that one likes Jack more for being Tyler because Tyler is so charismatic and powerful. The satisfaction is explained by the fact that the discovery justifies one having felt torn between Jack and Tyler throughout the film. It is likely that early on in the film one shared Jack's admiration for Jack. It is difficult, both for Jack and the viewer, to let go of this admiration when Tyler seems to be getting out of hand. The discovery that Jack is Tyler may appear to justify having found it difficult to let go. Even though one may not have suspected anything earlier on in the film, one's emotional construal of events throughout the film is sufficiently qualified to allow for the discovery to have a certain kind of significance. That the discovery can be both satisfying and shocking is only possible because the viewer has construed events as Jack construes them through empathy and Jack has been Tyler throughout the film.

Whereas with *The Crying Game*, we thought we were identifying equally with Dil and Fergus and are shocked when we find we are not, with *Fight Club* we thought we were identifying only with Jack and are surprised to find we were also identifying with Tyler. In neither case do our beliefs line up with our emotions. We believe that

homosexuality is just fine but we share Fergus' disgust; we believe that Jack and Tyler are different people yet we are satisfied by the discovery that they are in fact one.

VIII. Conclusion

I am sure we could think of many more examples of films which prescribe emotional responses based on identification. The three examples above illustrate how films fostering imaginative identification are particularly effective at evoking emotions with an important cognitive role. On the cognitive-perceptual theory of emotions, empathy brings us to see the world through another's eyes. Though this kind of instruction need not be useful to be valuable, there is good reason to think that it is useful. Learning through emotional experience that there is another way of construing a situation, even if it is not a way that we can endorse, is useful in helping us understand the behavior of others. It is also useful for comparison in judging the appropriateness of our own and others' emotions. Learning to see the world differently, by adding a new construal to one's emotional repertoire, is useful for personal growth. If we strive for the highest degree of appropriateness in our emotional responses for the sake of good character and right action, then the more refined and various our ways of seeing, interpreting or construing the world, the more successful will be our striving.³³

¹ See Berys Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film' in Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion, eds. Carl Plantinga and Murray Smith (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and Alex Neill, 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction' in Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

² Robert C. Roberts, 'What An Emotion is: A Sketch' in The Philosophical Review

XCVII.2 (1988), pp. 183-4.

³ See Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart (New York: Routledge Press, 1990) and Patricia Greenspan, Emotions and Reasons (New York: Routledge Press, 1988).

⁴ Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, p. 282.

⁵ Roberts, 'What An Emotion Is.'

⁶ Ronald de Sousa, The Rationality of Emotion (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 196.

⁷ Greenspan, Emotions and Reasons.

⁸ Amelié Rorty, 'Explaining Emotions' in Explaining Emotions, ed. Amelié Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 1980).

⁹ Roberts, 'What An Emotion Is,' p. 190.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

¹¹ At this point, a number of questions may arise regarding the substantiveness of Roberts account. In particular, we may ask how a construal, on Roberts' account, is different from a metaphor. Are all emotions metaphors or all metaphors emotions? Furthermore, how is a construal different from a wrong belief? Roberts has to answer these questions by referring to his additional conditions of concern and seriousness. But this implies that one can only know what distinguishes an emotional construal if one already knows what it is to be emotionally concerned. In order to avoid a charge of vacuity, Roberts could say more about what emotions alone can do for us and how we learn different emotions. That way, even if he could not say explicitly what distinguishes an emotion both from a belief and from a non-intentional feeling, he would be justifying the making of such a distinction.

¹² One might think that in this case the person must already be construing her situation as dangerous in order to respond with fear. To see how emotions themselves involve first-order construing, consider how they are learnt. De Sousa argues that very early on we learn to identify as emotions the acting out of characteristic responses to types of situations, which he calls 'paradigm scenarios.' An emotion is thus defined in terms of a paradigm scenario fixing its formal object, which is a second-order quality, like 'fearsome' or 'angering,' ascribed to the intentional object of the emotion. Such an account of emotions originating in instinctual responses and a shared culture is consistent with the automatic and nonconscious nature of emotional construing.

¹³ Rorty, 'Explaining Emotions', p. 272.

¹⁴ Rorty, 'Explaining Emotions'.

¹⁵ Greenspan, Emotions and Reasons.

¹⁶ See Susan Feagin, 'Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction' in The Canadian Journal of Philosophy 18.3 (1988), pp. 485-500 and James Harold, 'Empathy with Fictions' in The British Journal of Aesthetics 40.3 (2000), pp. 340-355.

¹⁷ Perhaps most famously, Kendall Walton, in Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), argues that when we engage with fiction we enter into a game of make-believe which generates quasi-emotions. These states are distinguished from real emotions by their involving a (real) belief in what is fictionally—and not actually--the case. Gregory Currie, in chapter 5 of The Nature of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), also refers to quasi-emotions in relation to fiction, but he distinguishes them from real emotions on the basis of their involving a fictional or 'make'-belief that something is the case.

¹⁸ Richard Moran, in 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination' in The Philosophical Review, 103.1 (1994), pp. 75-105, suggests that Walton's account—and others like it—go wrong in assuming that imagination in relation to fiction is essentially self-referential. On Walton's account, when I am moved by Macbeth's soliloquy I imagine, not only that Macbeth feels a certain way, but that I feel a certain way. But Moran does not think that the emotional component of imagining can be understood as part of the content of what is imagined. I can imagine with feeling being in an unfeeling state, and I can impassively imagine being in a emotionally charged state. Imagining something with feeling, Moran suggests, constitutes a mode of imagining rather than an imagining with a certain content.

¹⁹ Neill, 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction', p. 182.

²⁰ Richard Wollheim, The Thread of Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²¹ When I identify with a character, I am neither qualitatively nor numerically identical with him. I can imaginatively take up Napoleon's viewpoint on the battlefield without imagining that *I* am on the battlefield—the content of my imagining does not include a reference to myself.

²² Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film'.

²³ Carroll, The Paradox of Horror.

²⁴ Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film', p. 208.

²⁵ Murray Smith, Engaging Characters: fiction, emotion, and the cinema (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995).

²⁶ Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film', p. 204-5.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁹ Neill, 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction', p. 188.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 181-2.

³¹ Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film'.

³² Ibid., p. 214.

³³ I would like to thank the members of the Oberlin College philosophy department, Jim Bell, Dorit Ganson, Todd Ganson, Tim Hall, Al McKay, Peter McInerney, and Martin Jones, for their helpful discussion of this paper.