When film viewers are asked to describe their emotional reactions to films they often appeal to the notion of identification. They say things such as "I could really identify with that character," "the film was no good: there wasn't a single character I could identify with," or "I felt so badly about what happened to her, because I strongly identified with her." It is part of the folk wisdom of responding to films (and to literature) that audiences sometimes identify with characters, that the success or failure of a film partly depends on whether this identification occurs, and that the quality and strength of emotional responses depend on identification. It seems that any theorist interested in our emotional reactions to films must give an account of the nature of this process of identification and explain its importance in shaping responses. And there would appear to be no room for denying the existence and importance of spectatorial identification.

Yet film theory has exhibited a curious reaction to this folk wisdom. On the one hand psychoanalytically inspired theories have responded positively to these claims but treated them in hyperbolic fashion. Drawing on Lacan, such theories hold that the child is constituted as a subject through an act of identification with her own image in the mirror at the age of 6 to 18 months; the power of cinema in giving an impression of reality and as an ideological device lies in its ability to re-enact this basic process of identification. Film identification according to Jean-Louis Baudry has a dual aspect:

One can distinguish two levels of identification. The first, attached to the image itself, derives from the character portrayed as a center of secondary identifications, carrying an identity which constantly must be seized and re-established. The second level presents the appearance of the first and places it "in action"—this is the transcendental subject whose place is taken by the camera which constitutes and rules the objects in the "world."
metaphysical process, like Mr. Spock’s Vulcan mind-meld, between the audience member and the protagonist. This is not just deeply odd but actually impossible: two people cannot be made (numerically) the same without ceasing to exist. But here, as quite generally, etymology is a bad guide to meaning. Any argument exploiting this etymology to show that identification does not exist would be like an argument that noted that “television” has as its etymological root “seeing at a distance,” argued that we do not literally see things at a distance when we look at a television screen, but only their images, and concluded that televisions do not exist. The question is not what the etymology of the term is but of what it means, and the meaning of a term is a matter of its use in the language.

So how do we use the term “identification” when we apply it to a character in a fiction? One use is simply to say that one cares for the character. To say that there is no one in a film with whom one can identify is simply in this usage to report that one does not care about what happens to any of the characters. But in such a use, the fact that I identify with a character cannot explain why I care for her, for such a purported explanation would be entirely vacuous. The natural thought here is that identification in the explanatory sense is a matter of putting oneself in the character’s shoes, and because one does so one may come to care for her. But what is this notion of placing oneself in someone else’s position?

Psychoanalytic and Brechtian theories, given their belief in mainstream cinema as a form of illusionism, might naturally hold that just as the viewer is somehow under the illusion that the cinematic events are real, so she is somehow under the illusion that she is the character with whom she identifies. But that would credit the viewer of a film with an extraordinary degree of irrationality; it would hold that she does not believe that she is sitting safely in the dark, as is clearly the case, but that she believes she is swinging from a rope on a mountaintop, or shooting at villains, or otherwise doing whatever the film represents the character as doing.

A more plausible version of this story would hold that a “suspension of disbelief” occurs in the cinema: the viewer believes that she is not the fictional character, but that belief is somehow bracketed from her motivational set. In such cases the viewer reacts as if she believes that she is the character depicted, even though she does not in fact believe this to be the case. But then many of the viewer’s reactions to the film fail to make sense under this assumption: for instance, since characters in horror films rarely want to suffer the terrors that torment them, viewers who identify with these characters should storm out of the exits at the first appearance of these films, for on this construal of identification they should react as if they believed they were these characters.

A better version of the identification view would hold, rather, that the viewer imagines herself to be the character with whom she identifies. This, then, is part of the explanation of why she comes to care for the character, if she indeed does. But this formulation raises new worries, for it may be objected that it makes no sense to talk about imagining oneself to be someone else. Arguably there are no possible worlds in which I am identical with some other person—they are simply worlds in which I possess that other person’s properties without being him. So how can I imagine being another person? Similar worries apply if one holds that it makes no sense to think that I could be different in some radical way from the person I am (I could not have been a tenth-century female Eskimo, for instance). The reply is that even if one accepted claims of this kind, it would not follow that one could not imagine things that the claims hold are impossible. We can, in fact, imagine things that are not just metaphysically but even logically impossible—for instance, that Hobbes actually did square the circle (as at one time he thought he had done). And we do that not infrequently in responding to fiction—we may be asked to imagine people going back in time and conceiving themselves, we may be asked to imagine werewolves, or people turning into trees, or intelligent, talkative rats complaining about lordly, overbearing toads.

However, there is still a problem with holding that one imagines oneself to be another person when one identifies with him. As Richard Wollheim has noted, if I imagine myself to be a particular character (say, Jeeves), then since identity is a symmetrical relation, this is equivalent to the claim that I imagine Jeeves to be me. But the two imaginings are very different projects: in the former case I imagine myself in Jeeves’s position, serving and manipulating Bertie Wooster; in the second case I imagine Jeeves surreptitiously taking over my life, and I become disconcertingly butler-like.

What we should conclude from this is that the act of imaginative identification involves imagining—not, strictly speaking, being—that other person, but rather imagining being in her situation, where the idea of her situation encompasses every property she possesses, including all her physical and psychological traits (so we imagine the world from her physical and psychological perspective). Hence what I do in imaginatively identifying myself with Jeeves is imagining being in his situation, doing what he does, feeling what he does, and so on. And that is clearly different from imagining Jeeves being in my situation.

Wollheim has objected to this construal of identification: he holds that since I do not imagine myself to be identical to Jeeves, the account would allow me while imagining myself in his situation to imagine meeting him, which my imaginative project surely rules out. And it is indeed true that my imaginative project rules this out, but that is in fact compatible with imagining myself to be in Jeeves’s situation. For as we have understood the notion of a person’s situation, it comprises all of his properties; these include not
just his contingent properties but also his modal properties, such as necessarily not being a number, necessarily having the potential for self-consciousness, and necessarily not being able to meet himself. Thus Jeeves (fictionally) has the property of necessarily not being able to meet himself; that is, necessarily not being able to meet Jeeves. Hence, were the question raised of whether I could properly imagine myself meeting Jeeves when I am imagining myself in his situation, I ought to rule out imagining meeting him. For I ought to imagine possessing those of his properties which are relevant to this situation, in particular the modal property of being unable to meet Jeeves. Thus Wollheim’s rejection of the account of identification in terms of imagining oneself in another’s situation looks plausible only on an overly narrow understanding of someone’s situation that excludes certain of his modal properties.

This account of identification also fits how we talk of imaginative acts. We frequently talk of understanding someone by imagining ourselves in her situation, of putting ourselves in her shoes. And we come to understand her by imaginatively projecting ourselves into her external situation, imaginarily altering those aspects of our personalities which differ from hers, and then relying on our dispositions to respond in various ways, so as to work out what other things she might reasonably be supposed to be feeling.10

Even on this construal of imaginative identification, however, the idea that identification occurs in films seems to encounter fundamental difficulties. It is often supposed that one of the central cases of cinematic identification is when we are shown a point-of-view shot; here surely we are asked to identify with a character: we literally take up her perspective. But this claim has met with a barrage of objections. Currie has urged that if identification occurred in the point-of-view shot, then the viewer would have to imagine that what happens to the character happens to her and that she possesses the most obvious and dramatically salient characteristics of the character, and it would have to be that she has or imagines she has some concern with and sympathy for the values and projects of the character. But none of these, says Currie, need be the case. I often do not imagine any of the events happening to the character happening to myself, nor do I imagine myself having any of his characteristics, nor need I have the least sympathy with him—consider, for instance, the frequent use of point-of-view shots in horror films, taken from the perspective of the killer.11 Smith has also argued that the point-of-view shot need not give access to the character’s subjectivity: indeed, the point-of-view shot in horror films often functions to disguise the killer’s identity.12

These points about point-of-view shots are well taken, but they do not force us to abandon the claim that identification can occur in such cases. Once we construe identification as a matter of imagining oneself in a character’s situation, the issue becomes pertinent of which aspects of the character’s situation one imagines oneself in. As we have seen, we should construe the situation of the character in terms of what properties she possesses. Her physical properties include her size, physical position, the physical aspects of her actions, and so on. Her psychological properties can be thought of in terms of her perspective on the (fictional) world. But that perspective is not just a visual one (how things look to her); we can also think of the character as possessing an affective perspective on events (how she feels about them), a motivational perspective (what she is motivated to do in respect of them), an epistemic perspective (what she believes about them), and so forth. Thus the question to ask whenever someone talks of identifying with a character is in what respects does she identify with the character? The act of identification is aspectual. To identify perceptually with a character is to imagine seeing from his point of view; to identify affectively with him is to imagine feeling what he feels; to identify motivationally is to imagine wanting what he wants; to identify epistemically with him is to imagine believing what he believes, and so on. What the objections rehearsed above force us to see is that just because one is identifying perceptually with the character, it does not follow that one is identifying motivationally or affectively with him, nor does it follow that one imagines that one has his physical characteristics.

This may seem to distort the concept of identification. Surely, it will be argued that the notion of identification is a global concept that is, we imagine, being in that person’s situation in all respects, and in talking of aspectual identification we are in effect abandoning the notion of identification.

On the contrary, if identification were global, it could not in practice occur. Even a fictional character has an indeterminately large number of properties (most of which will be implicit, not explicitly stated by the text or film), and a real person has an infinite number of such properties. It would not be possible to imagine oneself as possessing all of these properties. And, of course, one does not do so: one picks on those characteristics that are relevant for the purpose of one’s imagining. Nor should someone hold that even though one does not imagine all these properties holding of oneself, one ought to do so. For even if one held (which I earlier argued against) that identification with a character requires you to imagine being identical with that character, it is not in general true that one is required to imagine all of the consequences of one’s imaginings. As Kendall Walton has pointed out, very often fiction requires you not to imagine such consequences; Othello speaks extraordinarily poetic verse, while saying that he is plain of speech, and yet no one notices this. Why is this so? To raise the question would be to ask a “silly question”; even though in the real world there would be an answer to this question, there is no answer in the world of the fiction.13 What we are to imagine is shaped by the knowledge that we are looking at an artifact
designed to prescribe certain imaginings, and our imaginings are shaped by the demands of the context.

It has sometimes been objected that the idea of identification is much too crude a notion, reducing the possibilities of our relations to characters to either being identified with a character or distanced from her, and thus we need to abandon the notion. Once we recognize the existence of aspecital identification, we can hold that the fact that we are perceptually crude a notion, reducing the possibilities of our relations to characters to either being identified with a character or distanced from her, and thus we need to abandon the notion. Once we recognize the existence of aspectual identification, we can see that recognition of these complexities is well within the grip of the notion of identification. Since we have distinguished different aspects of identification, we can hold that the fact that we are perceptually identified with a character does not entail that we are affectively identified with her—the fact that we are imagining seeing from her perspective does not require us to imagine wanting what she wants, or imagine feeling what she feels. It then becomes a matter of substantive theorizing to investigate under what conditions one form of identification fosters another. It would be surprising, given the complexity of film art in general, if one could find any invariant, law-like principles for linking different aspects of identification together. But that leaves plenty of space for investigating how one form of identification may tend (other things being equal) to promote another form, or for how certain film techniques may tend to enhance some kinds of identification.

So far we have been following out the implications of the thought that identification involves imagining oneself in another’s situation. This idea of imaginative identification is, however, not exhaustive of all that people mean when they talk of identification. Consider the idea of empathy, which is naturally thought of as a kind of identification, and a very important one at that. If someone has a parent die, identifying with the bereaved person characteristically takes the form of taking on her feelings, sharing them (“I feel your pain,” “I know what it’s like to undergo that loss”). But note that this is different from the notion of affective identification as we have characterized it. That required the viewer to imagine feeling what a person (or a character fictionally) feels; empathy requires the viewer actually to feel what a person (or a character fictionally) feels.

Now it is plausible that empathy requires one imaginatively to enter into a character’s mind and to feel with him because of one’s imagining of his situation. But that is to say that empathic identification requires some form of imaginative identification; it is not to conflate the two phenomena. It is possible to identify with a character affectively, imagining his sorrow, anger, or fear, yet not empathize with him, since one does not actually feel sorrowful, angry, or afraid with him. In fact, it is only those theorists who allow for the possibility of feeling real emotions toward merely imagined situations who can even allow for the existence of empathic identification with fictional characters (though they can, of course, allow for such identification with real people). The idea of empathic identification is that one feels toward the situation that confronts the character what the character (fictionally) feels toward it; and since that situation is merely fictional, the possibility of real emotions directed toward situations known merely to be fictional must be allowed.

The final notion we need to discuss is that of sympathy. As earlier noted, sometimes to talk of identification with a character is simply to say that one sympathizes with him. But if we want to retain identification as an explanatory concept, we should mark this off as a distinct usage. And, in fact, sympathy and empathic identification are distinct notions. To sympathize with a character is in a broad sense to care for him, to be concerned for him. (We need not care for him merely because he is suffering sympathy in the narrow sense since one can talk, for instance, of having sympathy with the goals of a political party, even though that party is not suffering.) This care can be manifested in a variety of mental states: fearing for what may befall him, getting angry on his behalf, pitying him, feeling elated at his triumphs, and so forth. These states need have no relation to what he is feeling: I may pity him because he has been knocked into a coma in a road accident and is feeling nothing; I may be angry on his behalf for what has been done to him, even though he may be stoical about it; I may fear for what will befall him, even though he is sublimely unaware of the imminent danger in which he stands. Empathy, in contrast, requires one to share in the feelings one ascribes to him: I am empathically angry if and only if (I believe or imagine) that he is angry, and the thought of his anger controls and guides the formation of my anger. So if he is in a coma and not feeling anything, nothing counts as empathizing with him. Since most people are concerned for themselves, empathizing with them will involve sharing this concern, and hence sympathizing with them. But the co-occurrence of sympathy and empathy is contingent on the psychology of the person with whom we are empathizing and sympathizing, rather than showing that these two kinds of dispositions to feel are the same.

These distinctions also allow us to answer an influential objection to the idea of identification advanced by Carroll. Carroll holds that identification with a character requires one to feel what she is feeling. But, he points out, the correspondence between what the viewer feels and what a character feels is normally at most a partial one. A woman is swimming in the sea, unaware that she is in imminent danger of attack by a shark: she is happy, we are tense and fearful. Oedipus feels guilt for what he has done: we do not feel guilt, but pity him. And Carroll holds that a partial correspondence of feelings is insufficient for identification.

Insofar as Carroll is discussing the notion of identification here, it must be that of empathic identification, for he is discussing what the audience
actually feels, not just what it imagines feeling. So, even if successful, his critique does not undermine the notion of imaginative identification. Moreover, because we have seen that the activity of identification is always aspectual (and therefore partial), it cannot be an objection to identification that the correspondences between what the audience is feeling and what the characters are fictionally feeling are only partial. For identification always is partial. Further, what Carroll’s examples show is that our responses to characters’ situations are often sympathetic (we are concerned at the swimmer’s situation, even though she does not recognize the danger and so feels no fear), rather than empathic. But this point hardly shows that empathy never occurs: when the swimmer does recognize the danger and panics, we then share her fear.

Carroll objects to this last move: he holds that we do not share the swimmer’s fear because her fear is self-directed, whereas our fear is directed toward her. However, this objection fails to see the significance of the imaginative element involved in empathic identification. That is, we have to place ourselves imaginatively in the swimmer’s situation in order to empathize with her. Thus when I imagine the shark’s attack on the swimmer, I am imagining the shark’s attack on me (since I am imaginarily in her situation), and hence I can share the swimmer’s fear, since in both cases it is self-directed.

Identification and Film Techniques

So far I have defended the concept of identification from the claim that it is mysterious or incoherent by distinguishing different kinds of identification: on the one hand, imaginative identification (imaginarily putting oneself in another’s position), which is in turn subdivided into perceptual, affective, motivational, epistemic, and perhaps other forms of identification; and on the other hand, empathic identification, which requires one actually to share the character’s (fictional) emotions because of one’s imaginarily projecting oneself into the character’s situation. On the basis of these different kinds of identification, one may come to sympathize with the character (this sympathy, as we have noted, is sometimes itself thought of as a kind of identification, but we shall treat it as one possible upshot of identification, since one can sympathize with someone without employing any sort of imaginative projection into his position). I have also deployed these distinctions to defend the claim that identification occurs in films against the sorts of objections that are often raised against it. Given these distinctions between different kinds of identification, we can now examine in more detail the role of identification in our relations to films.

As earlier remarked, the point-of-view shot is often thought of as the locus of character identification in film. In fact, it is the locus of perceptual identification (the viewer imagining seeing what the character fictionally sees), and it does not follow that the viewer identifies with the character in all other respects. The example of a shot in a horror film taken from the point of view of the killer shows that there is no necessary tendency to empathize with the character whose visual perspective we imaginarily occupy. However, since we now have the distinction between affective and empathic identification in place, we can see that there may be a tendency to affective identification resulting from this shot: that is, other things being equal this shot may get us to imagine what the character is feeling (though we need not actually feel it ourselves, i.e., we need not empathize with him). Consider the shot in The Silence of the Lambs taken from the point of view of Buffalo Bill, who is wearing green-tinted night-glasses, looking at Starling (Jodie Foster) while she flails around in the dark, desperately trying to defend herself from him. Certainly, we have no tendency here to empathize or sympathize with Bill—our sympathies lie entirely with Starling—but the shot does tend to foster our imagining of Bill’s murderous feelings (partly because we can see their terrifying effect on Starling).

The point-of-view shot, besides being an instance of perceptual identification and having a tendency to foster affective identification, also fosters a kind of epistemic identification. For the latter requires us to imagine believing what the characters fictionally believe; and some beliefs are perceptual. However, the idea of epistemic identification is broader than that of perceptual identification, since we may occupy the character’s epistemic perspective by virtue of having our knowledge of what is happening restricted to her knowledge (this is characteristic of the detective film, for instance).

Though the point-of-view shot is the characteristic form of perceptual identification in film, it is not the only type. This is demonstrated by another shot from The Silence of the Lambs. Consider the scene in which Starling and the other FBI agents are in the autopsy room with one of Buffalo Bill’s victims, who has been partially flayed by him. It is only towards the end of the scene that we are finally shown the corpse itself; up to this point we are confined to watching the investigators’ reactions, particularly Starling’s. Watching Foster’s finely nuanced performance, which registers barely controlled disgust and fear modulated by pity for the victim, we are invited to imagine what she sees without actually being shown it. The result is that what we imagine her seeing is very likely worse than what we are finally shown, since each viewer, watching the emotions registered on her face, is invited to imagine something that will justify these emotions, and so tends to imagine whatever would make these emotions appropriate to her: each imagines her own private nightmare scenario. Thus the expressive reaction shot, as well as the point-of-view shot, can cue the spectator to imagine seeing from the character’s point of view.

Furthermore, as the example also shows, the reaction shot can be a more
effective vehicle for affective and empathic identification with a character than is the point-of-view shot. The reaction shot shows the human face or body, which we are expert at interpreting for signs of emotion, and through the art of a consummate actor like Foster we can obtain a very full sense of what the character is feeling. Hence we are provided with a large amount of information with which to engage accurately in affective identification.

Moreover, if we are confronted with visual evidence of an individual’s suffering, we have a strong tendency to empathize and sympathize with her. Tales of mass disasters in distant countries also have the power to move us to empathy and sympathy, but generally more effective is a confrontation with the individual visage, with the particularities of an individual’s plight etched in her expression. Recall the way, for instance, that aid agencies employ photographs of individuals in states of distress as a way more effectively to convey their message of mass suffering.

As noted earlier, the point-of-view shot also has some tendency to move us to affective identification. But it has the disadvantage of having less information to convey about what the character is feeling, and because of the absence of a shot of the face, has less power to move us to empathy and sympathy. The point-of-view shot has in fact fairly crude options available for the conveying of feelings. It may employ a shaking camera to convey unrest and uncertainty (think for instance of the hand-held, jiggling shots in Cassavetes’ A Woman Under the Influence [1974], which convey something of the troubled minds of the married couple). It may employ low-angle shots to convey a sense of being dominated by other characters (think of some of the low-angle shots of Kane [Orson Welles] in Citizen Kane [1941]). Even more radically, the entire mise en scène may be set up so as to convey a character’s troubled state of mind (think of the shot from the crazed artist Borg’s perspective of the dinner guests in Bergman’s Hour of the Wolf [1968]). If we contrast these fairly simple options with the subtleties of Foster’s reaction shot in the autopsy scene, we can see that on the whole the reaction shot is more important than the point-of-view shot in mobilizing affective and empathic identification.

Epistemic identification also has a tendency to foster empathy, though in more indirect ways than does the expressive reaction shot. If our knowledge of what is fictional in the film corresponds to a high degree with that of a particular character, there is a tendency to identify affectively and to empathize with that character, even if we are antecedently not disposed to do so. Consider a scene in which we follow the movements of a group of criminals engaged on a job; we watch them being vigilant, stopping lest they be discovered, being alarmed at dangers, being hopeful about the success of the crime, and so on. In these cases where we have the same epistemic point of view on the events as they do, we can easily find ourselves empathizing with them and wanting their crime to succeed, even though normally we would not want this.

A more complex example of this phenomenon occurs in Harold Ramis’s Groundhog Day (1993). Pete the weatherman (Bill Murray) is caught in a comic version of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, condemned to live the same day over again and again until he gets it right. Our feelings for Pete are initially complex: his humor is hip and funny, but his cynicism is upfront, too, and our affections are divided between him and his colleagues. As the film progresses we increasingly empathize and sympathize with him. This is partly because he grows morally and becomes a more attractive figure. But it is also because we are stuck in the same epistemic situation as he is. No one apart from him and the viewer realizes that the scenes we are seeing have been played out many times before: we thus share the knowledge about what is happening with him and find it increasingly difficult to look at the world from any other point of view than his because we know that all the other characters do not appreciate what is going on. Here epistemic identification tends to foster our empathy and sympathy with the character.

In addition to these factors, there are others that tend to foster empathy and sympathy. First, empathy and sympathy are mutually self-reinforcing. To empathize with a character involves feeling what fictionally she is feeling; since most characters have a concern for their own welfare, by empathizing with them one will also be sympathetic to them, that is, one will be concerned for them. Conversely, if one is sympathetic to a character, one will tend to align one’s emotions with his, feel what he feels, and so empathize with him. Second, and more obviously, we tend to sympathize with characters who are represented as having various attractive traits. A wide range of traits can foster such responses: characters may be witty (as is Pete the weatherman), physically attractive, interestingly complex, and so forth. In Neil Jordan’s The Crying Game (1992) our sympathies are mobilized toward Jody (the British soldier, played by Forest Whitaker), Fergus (the IRA member, played by Stephen Rea) and Dil (the transvestite, played by Jaye Davidson) by their vulnerability: Jody is vulnerable because he appears to be in imminent danger of being killed by the IRA yet is in Northern Ireland for no better reason than that he needed a job; Fergus is vulnerable because he does not believe in the credo of violence to which he is ostensibly committed and is himself then endangered by it (and his vulnerability is displayed in his remark to Jody that “I’m not good for much”); and Dil is vulnerable because of her marginal social and sexual situation. Besides these kinds of character traits that can promote empathy and sympathy, the knowledge of who is playing the character can also materially engage our feelings. Hitchcock, for instance, was master at deploying this technique. Considered in terms of his character traits, Scotty
Identification and Emotion

Identification, then, plays an important role in our emotional responses to films. It also plays a significant part in teaching us how to respond emotionally to fictionally delineated situations. There are at least two basic forms that this kind of learning may take. The first is that through empathy our emotional reactions mirror those of a character, and that as she grows emotionally we do, too, learning to respond to situations in a way that we and she would previously have found inappropriate. The second basic type of learning results from identifying with a character, but coming to realize that her reactions are in some ways inappropriate to her situation, and discovering that there is a deeper perspective on her situation, different from her own. In the first case, both we and the character grow emotionally together; in the second only we may grow while the character remains much the same. The first possibility is illustrated by The Crying Game; the second by Max Ophul's Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948).

In The Crying Game we are led after the traumatic death of Jody to identify (epistemically, affectively, and empathically) with Fergus, who is traumatized by Jody's death and eager to escape the IRA. Jody has asked Fergus to take care of his lover, Dil; Fergus has seen a picture of her and found her very attractive. He falls in love with her, she performs oral sex on him, and at the turning point of the film she appears naked before him: Dil is a man. Fergus is aghast, strikes Dil, throws up in the toilet, storms out. Since the audience has been epistemically closely identified with Fergus throughout, they are also likely to be astounded by the discovery (Jaye Davidson's impersonation of a woman is extraordinarily convincing). The rest of the film is the story of how Fergus comes to accept the fact that he loves Dil, even though Dil is male ("I preferred you as a girl"), and goes to prison for her sake.

The Crying Game is thematically very rich, engaging with issues of race, gender, and love. What is interesting for our purposes is how Fergus is rep-
resented as coming to accept that he loves Dil, even though his heterosexuality was not previously in doubt. Love transcends mere gender boundaries; not only is that a theme of the film, but the audience is also positioned to want Fergus and Dil to continue their erotic friendship, even after it is clear that Dil is a man. Because we are multiply identified with Fergus and because Fergus comes to accept his love for Dil, we too are encouraged to accept it. Here identification with a character whose attitudes toward homosexuality change fundamentally in the course of the film also encourages the audience through empathy to want the relationship to work out, and thus also encourages them to question their attitudes toward homosexuality. This, then, is a particularly clear example of a film that deploys identification to get audiences to reconsider their emotional responses and to learn from a fictional situation.

*Letter from an Unknown Woman* is on the face of it a film that falls well within the conventions of the "woman's picture." Lisa (Joan Fontaine), the unknown woman of the title, loves Stefan (Louis Jourdan) from a distance and is enamored of his musical prowess, the sense of culture and mystery that he brings to her cramped bourgeois life, when she first encounters him at puberty. Yet she talks to him only a handful of times and goes to bed with him only once, from which she conceives a son. For the sake of that son, she marries an honorable man, whom she respects but does not love, but throws it all away when she meets Stefan years later. Yet Stefan does not recognize her, and she leaves his apartment distraught, apparently having finally seen through his superficial charm and having grasped the fact that she was no more than another conquest to him. Yet the film is structured around the letter she writes to him while she is dying, a letter that reveals her still hopeless infatuation with him, a letter that avers the great good that could have come out of their love—if only he could have remembered her, if only he could have recognized that she was his true muse, the woman who could have lent meaning to his life. Stefan, reading the letter, apparently accepts his responsibility and his failure, goes off to fight a duel with Lisa's husband, and thus departs to his certain death.

On the face of it, the film is a paradigm melodrama, a picture that intends not so much to jerk tears as to ladle them out in bucketfuls. And there is no doubt about the audience's multiple identification with Lisa. Hers is the voiceover, and almost all the scenes in flashback are those in which she features; she is quiet and beautiful with a childlike charm and an impressive determination. The audience is thus epistemically, affectively, and empathically identified with her, and there is no doubt about the resulting sympathy that they are encouraged to feel for her. Yet in a real sense, Lisa never learns the significance of what has happened to her. Her dying letter is a testament to how if only Stefan had been able to love truly, to dedicate himself to her, their lives would have been immeasurably richer. So identification with Lisa on this interpretation of the film would lead to a reinforcement of the romantic attitudes that many of the original audience presumably brought with them when they came to see the film.

There is another way to interpret the film, however. Lisa is an obsessive person, unable to recognize that she is projecting her romantic fantasies onto a figure who does not in the least conform to them, and that she is pursuing these fantasies literally to the death, even though there is abundant evidence that she is deluding herself in a way guaranteed to lead to disaster. For this view there is much evidence in the film. Lisa says things in her letter that are contradicted by what we see: for instance, that "I've had no will but his [Stefan's] ever," whereas in fact it is transparently clear that Lisa has a very strong will of her own (she is willing to throw away her marriage on a chance of being with Stefan), while Stefan wanders through life with little sense of direction (he admits that he rarely actually reaches any place for which he sets
out). These and other clues in the film give the audience evidence for a counter-perspective in the film, a point of view that is not Lisa’s, which shows us that Lisa’s views are partly fantasized distortions of her true situation.25

On this second (and I think better) way of interpreting the film, the audience is encouraged to identify with Lisa in several respects but is also provided with evidence that her actions are in certain respects foolish and self-deluded. If it grasps this counter-evidence, then what it has learned from the film is that certain of its romantic values are distorted, tending to encourage potentially disastrous self-delusions. Because the audience so much identifies with Lisa, it should take that lesson to heart; it cannot stand back and think that what has been shown about Lisa’s values has nothing to do with its own, since it has seen those values enacted in a woman with whom it has closely identified. This, then, is the second way that identification with a character may teach an audience about correct emotional responses. On this model, the character does not grow emotionally, but the audience does because of the way it has discovered that its values are flawed. Here identification plays a more indirect cognitive role than on the first model; to learn what it is appropriate to feel, the audience has to be prepared to detect the existence of a counter-perspective to that of the character. But identification functions to drive the lesson home, to show that the values and attitudes under attack are the audience’s own, and thus to create the possibility of a real, lived change in their basic commitments. As this possibility illustrates, the Brechtian idea that identification must always function so as to render the audience uncritically receptive to conventional values is false. Identification may work in an appropriate context to drive home some hard lessons.

I have argued that philosophers and film theorists who reject the centrality of the psychoanalytic paradigm should not also reject, as they all too often do, the idea of identification. Despite the criticisms that have been laid against the coherence and the explanatory power of the concept, it does in fact have a valuable role of play in understanding our emotional responses toward films. As used by audiences to describe and explain their reactions to films, it is undoubtedly somewhat crude. But once we make necessary distinctions, the concept can be refined so that it plays a valuable part in film theory and in the analysis of individual films. Abandoning the idea of identification because of its deployment in psychoanalytic theory is worse than throwing the baby out with the bath water. It is a failure to identify with the baby.