# Identification in Comics

## Jonathan Frome

Identification is not an issue unique to comics. People that read text-only books identify with characters in those stories, and film audiences identify with movie characters. What does the term "identification" mean? It's often used in a common sense manner; for example, we might say, "I really enjoyed that story because I identified so strongly with the protagonist." Yet the meaning of identification is rarely discussed explicitly.

Two prominent, modern commentators have attempted to move past intuitive senses of identification and explicate the issues surrounding the concept in some detail. Scott McCloud seems to believe that identification is a process deeply ingrained in comics due to their use of cartoon art. At the other end of the spectrum is Martin Barker, who believes that identification is an empty concept with no place in analysis of comics. In my opinion, neither of these positions is satisfactory. After I discuss these authors' views of identification, I will attempt to put forth some first steps towards a coherent conception of the term.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is a seminal work for comics criticism. It is one of the first works in English that attempts to offer a comprehensive set of theories for examining comics' formal elements. Its presentation is both accessible and compelling. In examining McCloud's claims about identification, I have sometimes found myself thinking that I was unfairly criticizing McCloud for failing to achieve something that he didn't set out to do — namely, write an academic book of theory and evidence as we might
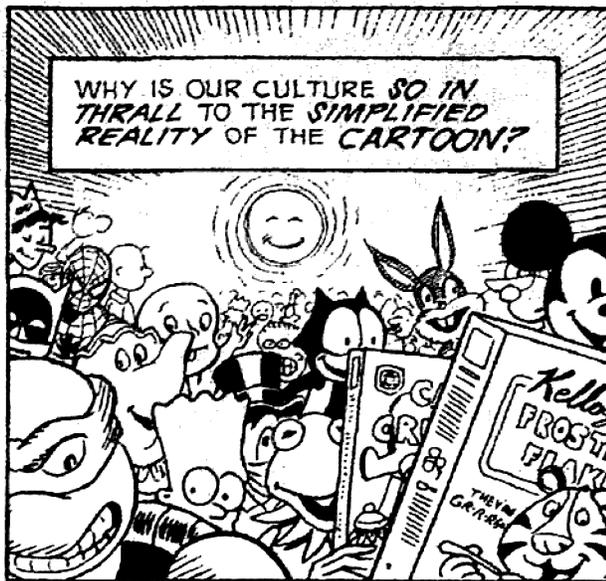


expect from a university press. However, I see only two solutions to the problem of using McCloud academically. Either we can dismiss McCloud's contribution, or we can hold it to the same standard that we would any other academic text. McCloud's terms, frameworks and theories have enjoyed such widespread acceptance that I think at this point it is especially important to move past their intuitive appeal and innovative nature to an critical evaluation of their argumentative foundation.

McCloud seems to believe that identification occurs whenever a person reads a comic, due to the nature of the drawing within. He begins by talking about the features of cartoon art, which is the style most often used in comics. He puts several representations of a face along a spectrum of detail, with a photograph at the left, and drawings decreasing in detail as they move toward the right. He says about a very simplified face, "Why, then, is the face above so acceptable to our eyes? Why does it seem just as real as the others?" (29) Does it seem as real? It's not clear that it does. In some sense, it's not as real as the others because it doesn't attempt a

"realistic" level of detail. In another sense, it seems as real because all of the faces are equally unreal. They are all only ink on paper. The only reality that this context demands (the context of discussing detail within *Understanding Comics*) is that these drawings are recognizable as faces. The context also speaks to McCloud's question about the face's acceptability. The face is acceptable because, in this context, it isn't called upon to do anything but be identifiable as a face.

The question of the role of a drawing is central to McCloud's following question, "Why are we so involved?" (30). By slipping from the concept of acceptability to the concept of involvement, McCloud has shifted from the question of identifying (or recognizing) a drawing as a face and identifying with a drawing of a character. McCloud asks about our involvement in a panel with pictures of Charlie Brown, Mickey Mouse, Bart Simpson and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. If we are at all involved in these pictures, and it's not clear that we are, presumably our involvement is based on our previous interaction with them in other forms. To those of us familiar with them, these pictures represent characters from stories. We have spent time with these characters and know their personalities. The fact that our response to these characters goes far beyond their simplified pictorial representation is shown by the fact that you can have a response to these characters based on their names alone. Compare a single drawing of Charlie Brown and a single cartoon drawing of a nameless boy with no story context. I assume that no one would respond as strongly, in terms of identification, to the nameless cartoon. He is not a character. He is simply a drawing. As such, although we can identify him as a boy, we have trouble identifying with him as a character.

McCloud believes, however, that there is something inherent in a simplified drawing that causes identification. This is an over-privileging of the static image. There seems to be a simple reductio ad absurdum to McCloud's position that identification is based in the cartoon image. Consider books and film. Have you ever strongly identified with a character in a book or movie? Have you ever seen a comic that you haven't identified with? If
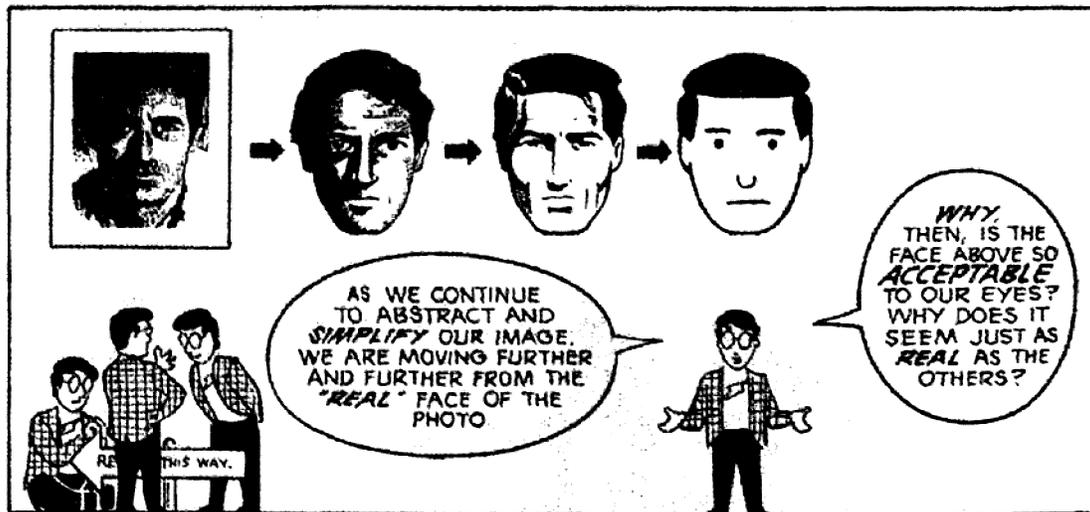
so, then it is hard to maintain that identification is based in simplified images. My argument assumes that identification is an essentially similar process across all media. If not, then it's possible that drawing style underlies identification in comics and other things underlie it in film and books. There is little reason, however, to think that identification's essence is different across media, although it's reasonable to think that different factors might cause identification in different media. At minimum, the burden would be on a McCloud defender to give reasons why the essence of the identification relationship between the reader and a character would be different in different media. Nevertheless, to continue our discussion of McCloud, let's assume for the moment that identification is essentially different in comics than other media.

McCloud argues that we identify with cartoons because they represent the way we are physically self-aware. Let me set out his argument before commenting. He states, "When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail" (35). "Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement... A sense of shape ... a sense of general placement. Something as simple and basic... as a cartoon. Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face... you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of a cartoon... you see yourself. I believe that this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part. The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!" (36). Here, McCloud moves very quickly. Bracket for a moment what it means to "see yourself" in a cartoon. His argument is that the cartoon face is an external image that somehow maps onto your "mind-picture" of yourself. This mind-picture presumably isn't visual, despite the fact that McCloud pictorially represents people's mind-pictures when he introduces the term. When speaking,



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YOU *KNOW* YOU SMILED BECAUSE YOU TRUSTED THIS MASK CALLED YOUR FACE TO *RESPOND!*

BUT THE FACE YOU SEE IN YOUR *MIND* IS NOT THE SAME AS *OTHERS* SEE!
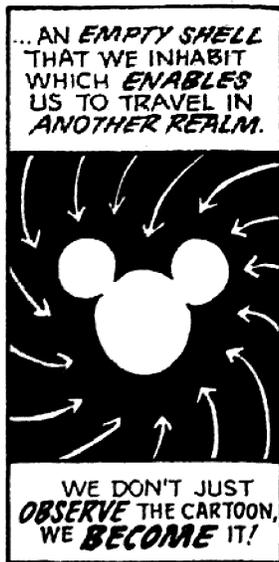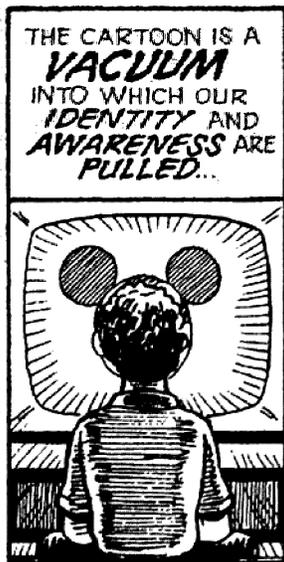
I don't have a constant visual representation of my face in my mind. What is this mind-picture, then? For the argument to work, it must be similar to a cartoon, so it must contain eyes and mouth. Try this. Close your eyes and keep your face still for a moment. Are you really more aware of your eyes, nose, and mouth then you are of your cheeks, chin, and the back of your neck? I believe if we are more aware of the former elements than the latter, it is only while we speak, because those are the parts of the face that move when we speak. If so, then this mind-picture is simply a tactile map of the motion of some of our facial features during certain activities. McCloud says that the self-awareness of our face is not based on feeling our face move, but on our trust that our face will respond as we intend (35). It's not clear what this means. Trusting that our face will respond cannot provide an awareness of its actual features. It's difficult to un-

derstand in what this simplified mind-picture consists if not tactile information. McCloud infuses this limited set of information with the responsibility of determining how we relate to cartoons.

There are a number of problems here. Consider McCloud's claim that in realistic drawings we see the face of another. Why would this be the case, when these drawings include the basic elements that make up our mind-picture? Presumably, because those drawings also include other elements not in the mind-picture, which prevent a full correspondence between the two. Yet most cartoons also include elements that don't correspond to one's mind-picture. Mickey Mouse has huge ears that, I assume, no one has in their simplified self-image. Yet Mickey Mouse is used here as an example of a cartoon that draws us in.

McCloud also distinguishes between this process of seeing yourself in a picture

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and what he calls universal identification. Unfortunately, he never explains what he means by either of these phrases. In describing how one sees oneself in a simplified image, he uses concepts often associated with identification, such as projection, involvement and identity, so it is confusing when he refers to universal identification as distinct. McCloud also says that the cartoon acts as a "vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" (36). Since his focus here is on seeing yourself in a cartoon, it seems he is attributing a cartoon's power to pull in your identity to that process. If so, one wonders how we could be so invested in a character based simply on the correspondence of limited physical information about our faces, regardless of other elements that I believe most of us would hold as more central to our identities, such as personality or social relationships. Think about the characters that you have and haven't identified with. Do you identify more with those that look like you or those that act like you? Finally, if the cartoon does act in the way McCloud suggests, it would seem that the reader would identify equally with every character drawn in a similar cartoony style. But this doesn't correspond very well to commonsense uses of identification, which suggest that a

reader identifies with different characters to different degrees.

McCloud returns to identification and his theory of simplified images when explaining what he calls the masking effect. He states, "Storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story's characters. And since viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning, cartoons have historically held an advantage in breaking into world popular culture. On the other hand, no one expects audiences to identify with brick walls or landscapes and indeed, backgrounds tend to be slightly more realistic" (42). The essential features that trigger the masking effect are realistic backgrounds and cartoony characters. Note that McCloud's statement is incredibly qualified: backgrounds tend to be slightly more realistic. It's a claim that is almost unfalsifiable without a comprehensive survey of comics. If we take the panels shown as examples, however, the claim seems reasonable. But what if we look at actual comic stories? Although I'm not suggesting that the masking effect is never used, I believe that it is used far less then its discussion would warrant. The great majority of comics panels I've examined have similar levels of detail in the characters and background. Any specific

set of examples risks being skewed. I thus encourage you to look at a wide range of comics yourselves, and I think you'll find what I found. Consider Larry Marder's *Beanworld*. The characters are very simplified, and the background is as well (in fact, it is almost non-existent in many panels). Next, a modern Marvel or DC superhero comic: a medium to high level of detail in both backgrounds and characters. At the far end of the spectrum, consider Masashi Tanaka's *Gon*. Extremely detailed in both characters and background.

Yet McCloud himself later states that many of his favorite artists use the masking effect very rarely. One wonders, then, what the effect of masking really is. What is the narrative implication of realistic backgrounds and cartoony characters? McCloud states: "This combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world. One set of lines to see, another set of lines to be." As appealing as this final summary is verbally (and the accompanying drawing is visually), again large leaps are being made. Is identifying with a character the same as masking yourself in one? Would I mask myself in a cartoony character I didn't identify with? Why do you need the masking effect to "safely" enter the world of the comic? Is there a perceived danger in mentally entering the world of a comic? If the masking effect employs comics' unique advantage over

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other media in viewer identification, allowing the reader to engage the comic in a deeper way, we should expect comics that don't use it to be less effective. In my reading experience, that isn't the case. Since many of McCloud's favorite artists don't use this technique, we can assume that he would agree that comics can be very effective without it.

Although I think that most readers do identify with comic characters, I'm not satisfied with McCloud's formulation. McCloud's discussion of cartoon art points to a possible factor in determining which characters we identify with; that is, a simple face might make us choose to identify with a character. I don't be-

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"subconscious imitation", but it's not clear what is being imitated. According to Wertham's own narrative, the comic character's actions and attitudes aren't being imitated. Rather, in some way not adequately explained, the child uses the character to satisfy an instinct. The nature of the identification is not clear. More importantly, there is no explanation of how this identification changes the child in a way that affects his actions once the comic is put down.

lieve, however, that the essence of identification is projecting your identity because a simplified drawing matches your personal "mind-picture" of your face.

Before I expand on my own notion of identification, however, I will discuss a challenge to the concept of identification by Martin Barker. In his books *Comics, Ideology, and Power* and *A Haunt of Fears*, Barker identifies a number of different ways critics of comics have centrally relied on the concept of identification. One type of criticism involves the concept of changing the reader through his identification with a character. Consider some of the common charges made against comics through history: they encourage violence, they glorify crime, they promote harmful stereotypes. If the content of comics is so objectionable, the question naturally arises, How is that content transmitted to the reader?

The answer most commonly given is "identification." As Barker notes, the critics' theory goes like this: first, the reader identifies in some way with the characters in the books; second, the comic has an specific effect on the reader through this process. So, for example, a critic might suggest that if a child reads a crime comic and identifies with the criminal, his own morals are at risk. Since the reader vicariously experiences committing the crime through his identification, and enjoys it, he is at risk for immorality after putting the comic away. Or, to use one of Barker's examples, a girl reads a romance comic and identifies with the main character. Since she vicariously participates in the character's world and temporarily assumes her values, after putting the comic away, she may unconsciously retain a trace of the comic's harmful stereotypes.

Note that the idea that the reader is changed implies that the comics' trans-

mitted content varies from the reader's own beliefs. Identification is often said to be the mechanism by which the comics' message overwhelms the reader's own judgment. By vicariously participating in the story, the reader's own identity, rationality and values are said to be diminished. This is the reason that the comic can succeed in affecting the reader. Yet there is often no discussion of how identification works, what it consists of, or how it actually leads to reader modification.

Dr. Fredric Wertham, perhaps the most famous comics critic, is one of the few who explicitly address this issue and attempt to theorize the process. In his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, he writes:

*Conscious imitation is only a small part of the psychological processes initiated by comic reading. Beneath is a kind of subconscious imitation called identification. The bridge of associations that link a child in this way to a comic-book figure and causes identification may be very slight. Actual resemblance or logical comparison has very little to do with identification. What is important is the emotional part of the reaction. The child gets pleasure from poring over what a crime comic-book figure does, is emotionally stirred and identifies himself with the figure that is active, successful, dominates a situation and satisfies an instinct, even though the child may only half understand what that instinct means.* (116)

Although Wertham's narrative attempts to flesh out identification slightly, it still isn't that helpful in explaining the process. Wertham does attempt to explain how the target for identification is chosen: Children identify with characters whose actions fulfill the child's own emotional instincts. But what does the identification consist of? Wertham calls it a

Barker notes that Maccoby & Wilson, in their landmark study, "Identification and Observational Learning From Films," characterize identification in the following way: We assume that when a viewer becomes absorbed in a dramatic production, he identifies himself, at least momentarily, with one or more of the characters. By identification we mean that the viewer, in fantasy, puts himself in the place of a character and momentarily feels that what is happening to that character is happening to himself. In this process, we assume that although he may reproduce very little of the gross motor behaviour of his screen character he does reproduce covertly many elements of the behaviour including the emotions he attributes to the character, so that when the character with whom he identifies himself is in a dangerous situation, for example, the viewer feels fear, and when the character escapes danger, the viewer feels vicarious relief. (76)

This explanation nicely complements Wertham's in that it describes how identification can be said to be based on imitation: the reader imitates the emotions of the character she identifies with. Barker notes a serious problem with this explanation, however. Often, we know something that a character doesn't; for example, that a killer is waiting around the corner. But we don't wait to feel fear until the character does. We feel fear as soon as we know that the character is in danger, whether or not the character knows it. Thus, it can't be fairly said that our emotional response to a character's situation is an imitation of the character's own emotions.

Based on the inability of this type of commentary to offer a coherent theory of identification, Barker claims that, "The concept of identification has no scientific validity as one for understanding the relationship between media and audiences"

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(CIP 109). This is a strong claim, and Barker's inclination to toss aside a concept that has been so unthinkingly used by comic critics is easy to understand, particularly since the mechanisms of identification have rarely been explained and the explanations that do exist are so often flawed. Yet the presumption has to be that identification is meaningful unless otherwise demonstrated, since it is so commonly used by people to explain their reaction to a work. Barker offers some reasons for dismissing the concept entirely. He writes, "Presumably, the more complete [identification] is, the more completely we 'take on' the attributes of the character we are identifying with — including, presumably, any self-evaluation and rational judgment that they exhibit" (*CIP* 109). Thus, to draw out Barker's implication, if the character we are modeling is rational and has a strong sense of self, then the reader should show similar qualities, which would prevent him or her from being unknowingly or negatively altered by the comics' content. There are two problems with this. First, identification doesn't provide the reader with a character's abilities. I can't fly simply because I identify with Superman. Similarly, we shouldn't expect a reader to act rationally just because a character does. If the critics are right that identification undermines a reader's sense of self, then a character's strong sense of self might motivate a reader to stand firm in his identity, but wouldn't necessarily give him the ability to do so. The second problem is that Barker's argument only attacks the idea that identification can alter a reader for the worse. It doesn't give reason why the concept is theoretically empty, *per se*. It is possible that identification does exist but cannot have significant effects on the reader.

Barker then argues that without "those assumptions about loss of self-awareness or rationality, all we are left with is 'empathy'. But 'empathy' has none of the power which 'identification' claimed for itself, to demonstrate media influence" (*CIP* 109). Yet Barker himself has shown that empathy isn't quite right either, since the reader doesn't feel the emotions the character feels; rather, the reader responds in her
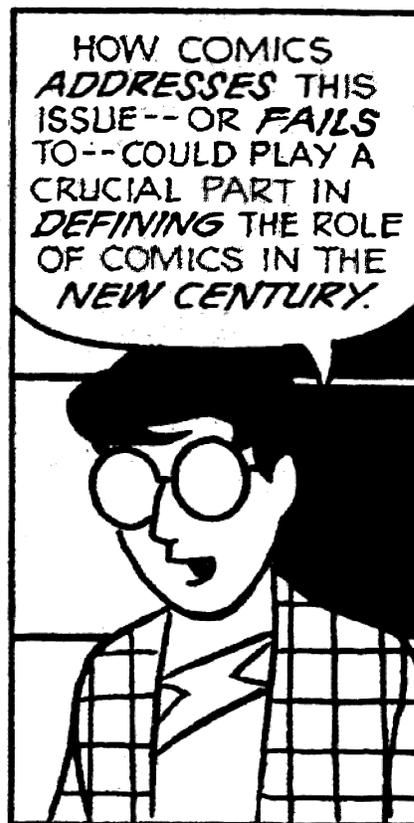
own way to the character's situation. Maccoby and Wilson's earlier description of identification is ambiguous regarding this point. Recall their claim that the reader reproduces "the emotions he attributes to the character" with which he identifies. Yet when expanding on this, the researchers ignore the character's emotions, saying that the viewer feels fear or relief based on the identified-with character's situation, not his emotions. They've thus switched from the reader reproducing the character's emotions to the reader independently responding to the character's situation. The apparently more accurate description of identification, the latter, isn't captured by empathy. Something other than empathy or sympathy is occurring when identification occurs. But what?

I am not so ambitious as to attempt to present a completely fleshed out theory of identification in this article, but I will make some comments. Discussions of identification tend to conflate numerous issues in confusing ways. I think that it is useful to break these issues into three main questions. First, in what does the identification consist? That is, how can we best describe what happens when we identify with a character? Second, what causes a reader to identify with a character? Third, what is the effect of identification on the reader?

Presently, I'm most interested in the first question: What is the essence of identification? This also seems to be the question one must answer before progress can

be made on the other two. I am unsatisfied with the formulations presented earlier. I think identification is best understood as the conscious or unconscious decision to care about a character's welfare as if it were your own. Thus, there is no essential projection of yourself into the character, or vice-versa, although that may be a factor in the separate issue of choosing whom you identify with. It is simply caring strongly about the character. Some examples will show the advantages of this conception. We have all identified with characters that have been defeated, humiliated, or killed in a story. Thus, Wertham's notion that identification is based in fulfilling the fantasy to dominate seems too narrow. We have identified with movie characters who are very detailed and look nothing like us. McCloud's theory can't account for this. We feel emotions that identified-with characters don't feel. Recall the situation in which we know something the character doesn't: a killer is around the corner. Thus, Maccoby & Wilson's notion of emotional imitation seems inadequate. Finally, consider identification as viewers projecting themselves, in fantasy, into the character's place in the fictional world. Although this is largely satisfactory, there are situations where the reader wants something for the character that she would never want for herself. For example, I might desire that an identified-with character fulfill his dream of becoming a concert violinist. Through identification, I can desire this for him, even if I have no interest in being a concert violinist. Hopefully, this account of identification as simple caring for a character can form the basis for beginning to address a specific identification's causes and effects. Note that this description of identification reverses the rhetoric of the comics' critics that claim identification causes a diminished sense of self and rationality. Identification is not about losing yourself to a character, but about expanding your identity to include the character. In this way, hopefully we can change talk about identification from the transmission of harmful content to a sense of constructive engagement with the text. ✛