

“MY FACE! GIVE IT BACK!”:  
INTERROGATING MASK METAPHORS AND IDENTIFICATION IN SCOTT  
MCCLLOUD’S *UNDERSTANDING COMICS*

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that one way to resolve some of the discrepancies in the theory of identification proposed by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, such as his mask metaphor, is to approach his theory via theatrical conceits. By thinking of identification in the terms of an actor playing a masked character, in which to read a comic and identify with a cartoon character means to put on a mask and imaginatively play the character, McCloud's contention of cartoons matching our basic mind-pictures becomes readily resolved by virtue of the fact that the mask is serving as a dramatic signifier of the reader's inner reality. That is, by imaginatively bringing to life the iconic cartoon form, the reader mimetically becomes the character, hence making it entirely plausible for anyone to enter the world of the cartoon and see themselves in the faces of the characters. The mask thus becomes a logo that transforms the reader's body into *logos*, granting access to the realm of the symbolic by covering up a reader's personal identity such that he or she becomes a cipher, at liberty to see whatever he or she wants in the cartoon image. However, regarding the comics panel as a kind of dramatic stage in which the identifying reader is intimately involved as both actor and initiator of theatrical communication, raises other problems. It not only problematises the distinction between reality and artifice in an imaginative performance context, but also ignores the fact that masks are frequently used for purposes of preventing rather than promoting audience identification. McCloud's theory, in attempting to circumvent the issues surrounding the fraught relationship between self and other that are inherent in any discussion of identification by applying the mask as a structuring term, raises new issues of its own.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## Primary Sources:

Making Comics	<i>MC</i>
Reinventing Comics	<i>RC</i>
Understanding Comics	<i>UC</i>
Prisoner on the Hell Planet	<i>Prisoner</i>

## Secondary Sources:

Comics and Sequential Art	<i>CASA</i>
Eisner/Miller	<i>E/M</i>
Seduction of the Innocent	<i>SOTI</i>

## Authors:

Warwick and Cavallaro	<i>W&amp;C</i>
Moore and Gibbons	<i>M&amp;G</i>

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: Why I Am Writing This Essay and Why I Think You Should Read It

Fig. 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two consecutive panels, the first showing Rorschach adjusting his gloves and the second showing him holding up the inkblot mask. The captions read: “Putting them on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spotless gloves./ My face” (V.18). Original source: Moore, Alan and Gibbons, Dave. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1986. Print.

Fig. 1: *Watchmen* V.18 (© DC Comics)

I begin with these panels from Alan Moore’s and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* because they exemplify several of the themes I will be dealing with in this essay. Twilight has fallen upon alternate history New York, and the masked vigilante Rorschach has just retrieved his costume

from its hiding place amidst alleyway trash in preparation for the night ahead. While conventional superhero identity dynamics work by having the costumed persona serve as the disguise and secret identity of its wearer, Rorschach, however, inverts this dynamic by making it quite clear that the man underneath – the doomsday sandwich-board prophet Walter Kovacs – is only the disguise and that the costumed persona of Rorschach is in fact his true self. Dressing up, for Rorschach, is no mere extension of self into inanimate clothing. Rather, by metonymically regarding musty clothing as his “skin” and a cloth mask as his “face” (V.11), Rorschach psychologically substitutes fabric for flesh in a process of self-transformation so thorough that the persona signified by the costume comes to replace that of its wearer, even when the costume is not being worn. Three hours later, when caught and unmasked by the police in a sting operation, Rorschach’s rage has more to do with the unwonted violation of his body than with his being arrested. He screams helplessly up at his captors: “No! My face! Give it back!” (V.27).

Scott Bukatman notes that superhero costumes, on top of serving as a means of public recognition, function as “marks that guarantee the superhero body passage into the field of the symbolic” (54) by obscuring the wearer’s private identity, making him into an anonymous entity

whose persona may be rewritten externally and inferred anew by his iconic clothing. The superhero, in the words of Roland Barthes, is “at once [himself] and another,” an invincible “eternal person” (256) able to successfully contain “the multiplication of persons in a single being” without ever losing himself, his identity “rich enough to be multiplied” and yet “stable enough never to be lost” (257) to the changing signification of his clothing. The persona of Kovacs, “muffled by latex” (M&G VI.21) into non-existence, leaves behind his body as the blank cipher upon which Rorschach is free to “scrawl [his] own design” (VI.26). This design is embodied in the form of Rorschach’s shifting inkblot mask/ face, which like the ideal Barthesian clothing/ body, remains stable even as the viscous black patches upon it move about in constant flux. By posing as a substitute skin, Rorschach’s mask points to the shamanistic “decorporealisation” of Kovacs’ body, denying the flesh in order to strip it of emotional and carnal weaknesses, “foregrounding [Rorschach’s] own irreducible materiality” (W&C 129). As readers beholding the inkblot mask through the triple frames of Rorschach’s eyes, the comics panel aligned with his eyes, and the first-person captions of Rorschach’s journal, we are tacitly invited by Moore and Gibbons to immerse ourselves into Rorschach’s subjective point of view. And to the extent that the reader is responsible for moving the story along by imaginatively filling in the action that takes place between two panels, to take on Rorschach’s point of view here is to be transformed along with him – to put on his clothes and mask/ face, to head out into the alley, and to rescue a woman by garrotting her assailant with a length of twisted cloth.

By inverting the superhero identity dynamic in which the man under the costume functions as the disguise rather than as the true self, Moore and Gibbons interrogate through their characterisation of Rorschach the validity of traditional binaries that associate truth with depth and deception with surface, the mask instead offering us an understanding of Rorschach’s psyche

in terms of exteriority rather than interiority. Indeed, the black and white colours on the mask/ face that change shape without ever mixing or running into amoral grey, their symmetrical patterns devoid of meaning except for what a viewer chooses to imagine, seem to represent perfectly Rorschach's uncompromising moral absolutist and nihilist outlooks on life. Yet in setting up the mask/ face as an "involvement shield" that allows Rorschach and the readers who have put on Rorschach's face to "project intended identities on to the external world while simultaneously "isolat[ing] themselves" (W&C 130) behind the privacy of a mask, Moore and Gibbons remind us that at the same time a mask releases the wearer's body into the equivocal realm of symbol, it also has the inveterate tendency to draw attention to the mask itself as an artificial construct. While masks facilitate self-effacement, they also act as vehicles for self-exposure, implying that the wearer has something to hide. For instance, despite having declared himself free from lust upon donning his costume, Rorschach is nevertheless quick to display a perverse pleasure at seeing "something rewarding" in the eyes of the man he is about to strangle, musing sadistically to himself before he moves in for the kill that "the night is generous to me" (M&G V.18). Neither can we ignore the signifying structure of the mask/ face at the non-visual technological level. Made from a rejected tight-fitting latex dress that Kovacs felt compelled to "cut" up until "it didn't look like a woman anymore" (VI.10) the material and actions involved in the manufacture of the mask/ face betray both Kovacs' and Rorschach's misogynistic tendencies, at the same time suggesting repressed libidinal energies that Kovacs has not quite succeeded extinguishing in the Rorschach persona. To this effect, Bukatman argues that every mask represents the "rebirth" of the "armoured body" (55) – armoured because it hides "the erotic and the mortal truths of its being," severing the ego from the "weakness and frailty of the flesh" such that the body remains "rigid against the chaos of surrounding disorder" (56). In making for

himself a mask with the idealised image of “a face that [he] could bear to look at in the mirror” (M&G VI.10), Rorschach inadvertently reifies for himself the Lacanian fantasy of a unitary selfhood free from the fear of ego-dissolution. As a self-imposed disguise, the special virtue of a mask is that it allows its wearer “to impersonate someone, even himself, in a favourable guise [...] whether or not that representation is wholly imaginary, delusional, self-serving, or meets the expectations of others” (Brilliant 113). And for Rorschach, this means exorcising both the ghosts of Kovacs’ traumatic childhood and his shame at being fallibly human by casting himself in the self-actualising role of a masked superhero – someone capable of performing, no matter how imperfectly or paradoxically, an identity free of the failings of a mere man in a costume.

Notably, in claiming for himself the traditional narrative of a consistent selfhood, Rorschach must also necessarily acknowledge every action he commits as indubitably his own, including the aforementioned garrotting of the assailant. To exonerate himself from Rorschach’s crimes by claiming to have become someone else while wearing the mask/ face would be tantamount to admitting that his identity has fractured and that he is no longer wholly himself. For the readers who have imaginatively joined Rorschach in performing the act of righteous self-gratifying murder from beyond the panel frame, on the other hand, casting off their own bloodguilt seems a lot easier. After all, all they apparently have to do is to reassert the diegetic wall that separates Rorschach’s world from their own by reminding themselves that Rorschach is only a character in a comic book and that any murder that took place was purely fictional. Distancing themselves from Rorschach’s actions is as easy to do as slipping off a mask and ending the imaginative play that is taking place between panels. Yet the masking process, as Moore and Gibbons make clear, is nowhere as ideal or ontologically stable as Rorschach believes it to be, with both his masked and private identities disguising and constantly coalescing

into each other. My sense here is that acts of masking leave impressions on the wearers such that any mask, whether literal or metaphorical, carries with it the potential to alter the wearer's identity. Bakhtin speaks of the mask as a theme based on "a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles" (40). And insofar as every mask offers to its wearers the magnified notion of "dress as a structure endowed with autonomous powers," able to "sustain or shatter the wearer's identity" by serving as a "frontier between the self and the non-self" (W&C 129), masks then also function as theatrical devices that allow the wearer to create for themselves the illusion of a stable identity founded upon the static image of the mask. To be able to successfully perform a masked identity, as Rorschach knows all too well, is to be able to give yourself a new face to behold in the mirror.

I find that the themes and issues surrounding masking, comics reading, and the complicated relationship between body and dress in *Watchmen* may be fruitfully related to an examination of identity and identification in Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics*. One of McCloud's key assertions in *UC* is that the simplified form of the cartoon body, especially when juxtaposed against a realistically drawn background, invites the reader to participate in a vicarious sign-reading experience unique to comics that he calls the 'masking effect.' The cartoon, according to McCloud, is a form of "amplification through simplification" (*UC* 30) – a basic drawing that focuses upon specific details in order to strip an image down to its most essential meaning. A cartoon face, for instance, may consist of nothing more than "a circle, two dots and a line" (31) and will yet still be recognised by readers as a face. McCloud accounts for our ability to recognise and respond to faces in cartoons by arguing that this ability is a function of reader identification. He begins by encouraging his readers to think of their faces as masks facing outward, worn from the day they are born and seen by everyone they meet with

the exception of themselves. Since readers are unable to see their own face-masks despite being informed of its constituent parts (e.g. eyes, mouth, cheeks) through actions like smiling and opening their eyes, this suggests for McCloud that “the face you see [of yourself] in your mind is not the same as [what] others see” (35) when they look at you. Indeed, as he literally illustrates, while you are always able to see another person’s face in “vivid detail” (35) when interacting with them, the “mind-picture” (36) or mental image that a person holds of his or her own face is by contrast never as vivid or as well-formed as the face of the other. [Fig. 2]

McCloud goes on to suggest that our mind-pictures are analogous to cartoon faces, since they are both basic images that possess “a sketchy arrangement... a sense of shape... a sense of general placement” (36). Drawing Platonic distinctions between what he refers to as the conceptual world and the sensual world, he finds that our “identities belong permanently to the conceptual world” since they are unavailable to sensory confirmation, whereas “everything else [...] belongs to the sensual world, the world outside of us” (40).

McCloud then proposes that cartoons also belong to the conceptual world in that they too de-emphasize “the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of Form” (41). This congruence between cartoons and identity (i.e. body-image) allows photorealistic art to emphasise alterity and the objective world without, while cartoons emphasise likeness and the

Fig. 2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two consecutive panels on two consecutive pages. The first showed two people looking at each other with thought bubbles containing a realistic image of the other, and the second showed the same two people in the same pose, but with the thought bubbles now containing simplified images of their own face. The captions read: “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” (36). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 2: *Understanding Comics* 35, 36 (© Scott McCloud)

subjective world within. Hence, he argues, while to view a realistic drawing of a face would be to see the face of another, “when you enter the world of the cartoon ... you see yourself” (36).

In other words, identification, for McCloud, means being able to see yourself in a character, and the main reason we are so “involved” (30) with cartoons is because they represent the abstract way in which we are non-visually self-aware. By this logic, cartoon characters with their simplified features are easier for readers to identify with than more photorealistic renditions of the same characters. Thus, when cartoony characters are paired with realistically drawn backgrounds, leading the reader to identify with the character while not identifying with the background (and indeed, “no one expects audiences to identify with brick walls” (42)),

Fig. 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two consecutive panels whose captions were meant to finish the sentence immediately preceding the figure as a visual block quotation. The first panel showed a simply drawn reader avatar wandering in a realistically drawn landscape and the second panel showed the blanked out silhouette of the same reader avatar in negative black space. The captions read: “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” (43). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 3: *Understanding Comics* 43 (© Scott McCloud)

McCloud explains that the cartoon character is able to serve as a mask because it is “an empty shell” and a “vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled,” allowing a reader to easily extend his or her identity and “become” (36) the cartoon. [Fig. 3] By “filling up” and giving “life” (37) to the cartoon mask via an infusion of the reader’s interiority, the cartoon becomes a part of the reader at the same time the reader becomes the cartoon. McCloud believes

such acts of character identification, especially when amplified by the masking effect, are an automatic and integral part of the comics reading process, accounting for the exceptionally high degree of “viewer involvement” (204) in comics. Moreover, given that comics have the “whole world of visual iconography at their disposal” (202) with which to express a person’s “innermost needs and ideas” (57), for the reader seeking to articulate himself or herself through character identification, McCloud finds that the medium offers an unprecedented advantage in expressing that which is invisible – the human being “from the inside” (194). He even goes as far as to propose that in a world where “no other human being can ever know what it’s like to be you from the inside [and] no amount of reaching out to others can ever make them feel exactly what you feel” (194), that comics are “one of the very few forms of mass communication in which *individual* voices still have a chance to be heard” (197, my emphasis), advocating strongly for the cartoon as one of the most suitable vehicles for depicting the abstractness of human interiority.

McCloud, however, fails to adequately account for the purported correlation between abstraction in cartoon art and reader propensity to identify with that cartoon, other than by suggesting that the mutual location of identities and cartoons in the conceptual realm affords them some amount of kinship. Although prominent comics creators such as Chris Ware and Art Spiegelman have made similar claims to McCloud in asserting that realistic drawings block reader empathy by making the art “more resistant to reading” (Ware 11) while cartoon images “magnify the visual impact of character [and] the telegraphing of emotions” (Brown 104), these do not suffice to explain the tenuous link between affect and art that McCloud makes in pronouncing that our responses to cartoons, emotional or otherwise, are visually predicated. Indeed, the explanation of a reader’s involvement in comics as simple visual identification with

the cartoon character is precisely the angle adopted by critics like Fredric Wertham when they charge comics with corrupting children – the child subconsciously imitating the negative behaviours of the strong-man characters he identifies with while reading. Scholars such as Jonathan Frome have also challenged McCloud by pointing out flaws in his reasoning. One of the main contentions is that by McCloud’s logic “the reader would identify equally with every character drawn in a similar cartoony style” when “commonsense” alone suggests that a reader is more likely to “identify with different characters to different degrees” (Frome 84), based on other factors such as plot and personality. A case in point: the cats in Spiegelman’s *Maus* are “drawn just as ‘iconically’ as the mice,” yet the antagonist Nazis, whom are all depicted as cats, “are rarely individualised enough to merit a reader’s sympathy” (Cates 103). Whatever the process of identification in comics consists of, assuming that it even differs at all from the process of identification in other media, I do not think that its primary essence stems from “projecting your identity because a simplified drawing matches your personal ‘mind-picture’ of your face” (Frome 85). Nor am I satisfied with McCloud’s treatment of masking as a means of depicting our non-visual self-awareness in exclusively visual terms, in which the mask works for the reader in the same way it does for Rorschach, guaranteeing its wearer access to an identity ostensibly impervious to acts of self-transformation. McCloud qualifies the masking effect as a means for readers to ‘safely’ enter the comics world – is there something inherently dangerous about entering the comics world without being masked in a character? And if so, how does being masked in a character make reading any safer? Would a reader of *Watchmen* who has identified with Rorschach and masked himself in the character, thus vicariously experiencing in his or her imagination what it is like to willingly strangle a man, be able to emerge from the reading process completely unchanged?

I believe that such ambiguities deserve clarifying, not only because of the problematic sighted assumptions regarding identity and identification that prevail in an increasingly dominant visual culture, but also because McCloud's theories, if true, would distinguish the comic as an exemplary medium for the expression and communication of human interiority. Yet for McCloud to acclaim comics as a medium that unproblematically absorbs the reader into its action by means of simple identification with a character would be to then negate much of the medium's ethical and political power. As Brecht posits, "to submit to an experience uncritically [...] by means of simple empathy" with the characters in a story is to nullify one's capacity for political action by refusing "the alienation that is necessary to all understanding" (174). To automatically identify with characters in comics that seek to reframe the meaning of human bodies by discouraging reader identification, such as *Maus*, would be to ignore the alterity of both the characters and the incidents shown by obviating critical distance in favour of orgiastic vicarious and emotional experiences.

I will hence argue that one way to resolve some of the contradictions and ambiguities in McCloud's work is to approach them through theatrical conceits, whereby to read a comic book is to actively contribute towards the animation of the characters via imaginative acting out within the proscenium arch of the panel. Understanding comics through the structural mechanics of the arch in turn allows us to understand McCloud's conceptions of identification and viewer involvement in the terms of an actor playing a masked character. For if to read a comic and identify with a cartoon character means to put on a mask and imaginatively play the character, the contradiction of the cartoon matching the reader's basic mind-picture becomes readily resolved by virtue of the fact that the character-mask is serving as a dramatic signifier of the *reader's* inner reality. In other words, by imaginatively "filling up" and bringing to life the

iconic cartoon form, the reader mimetically becomes the character, hence making it entirely plausible for anyone to “enter the world of the cartoon” and “see yourself” (*UC* 36) in the faces of the characters. In this way, the character-mask, as McCloud puts it, becomes for the duration of the reading process “just a little piece of *you*” (37, my emphasis), and as with all other props, may also be worn and taken off as it suits the reader-actor to “extend” (43) his or her identity into the character. However, given the hybrid discourse of the mask as both a dramatic device and a body synecdoche, casual assumption of the multiple “roles” (McLuhan 7) afforded by cartoon body-masks runs the inadvertent risk of reducing identification to an issue of “play” – identity becoming the “keyboard of signs from among which an eternal person chooses one day’s amusement,” ignoring “the most serious theme of human consciousness (*Who am I?*)” (Barthes 257). Processes of masked identification, I contend, are nowhere as safe or straightforward as McCloud makes them out to be, being “fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 61).

In approaching comics by way of theatrical conceits, I do not mean to realise W.J.T. Mitchell’s criticism of the comparative method in the cross-study of visual and verbal arts by “filling in familiar grids with novel (but unchallenging) detail” as a means of conducting “intellectual housekeeping” (86) between distinct literary mediums and the critical discourses surrounding those mediums. Rather, in taking the metaphor of the mask to its logical extreme by considering the possibilities of masking as the default ontological state of being and identification as the recognition of yourself under a character-mask, I am seeking to understand how the mask metaphor operates on both the descriptive and prescriptive levels for McCloud, and what implications that metaphor in turn holds for us as comics readers. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson contend that since the “essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind

of thing in terms of another” (5), the very “systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another [...] will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept” and “keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (9). This essay’s goals are two-fold: firstly, to look briefly at how writers besides McCloud have dealt with the issue of identification within and without comics, in order to see how McCloud responds to and draws upon specific themes and ideas in their writing; and secondly, to map out McCloud’s theory by examining his use of masking as a vital means of constructing both reader and character identities. For the purposes of this essay, I will be drawing my own case studies from self-conscious comics – namely, *Watchmen* and *Maus* – in which the trope of the masked protagonist serves as the exemplary model through which the authors explore wider issues of subjectivity and self-actualisation. By inviting his readers to see themselves in cartoon faces, without ever acknowledging the face as the nexus around which sighted assumptions of identity are “socially recognised and constituted” (Eakin 38), McCloud’s theories raise for us crucial questions concerning reading, reality, and the representation of bodies in comics literature. “Understanding comics,” as he candidly puts it, “is serious business” (UC 197).

## **Chapter 2: Some Issues with Identification: It's Probably a Good Idea to Know What Exactly I'm Talking About Before I Start Talking About It**

One of the chief difficulties I have experienced in the writing of this essay is that McCloud does not provide anything resembling a working definition of identification anywhere inside *UC*. Although he talks at length about the importance of identification as an involvement mechanism and about the cartoon absorbing our identity and awareness of self, all the while using terminology often associated with the process in question (e.g. projecting; extending; becoming; identity), he does not explain what any of these are actually supposed to mean. For example, Frome observes that McCloud distinguishes between the process of seeing yourself in a cartoon face and something else he calls 'universal identification' without making obvious what the distinction between the two types of identification is (Frome 83-84). In order to figure out what is 'universal identification,' I am required to refer back to an earlier page where McCloud describes "the universality of cartoon imagery," in which the "more cartoony a face is [...] the more people it could be said to describe" (*UC* 31). Universal identification in this case therefore approximates to universal *representation* – that is, a basic cartoon face with a circle, two dots, and a line, is able to symbolically represent all or most human beings.

Theorists such as Neil Cohn believe that McCloud is applying this particular definition of identification throughout *UC*, in which to identify with a cartoon simply means to perceive the cartoon as a "visual modality" (Cohn 10)– a picture that represents something else in an abstract manner – in much the same way that one might recognise the letters 'm-a-s-k' to be representing the aural sounds indicating 'a covering for the face.' While Cohn's purely linguistic interpretation helpfully underscores the operation of sequential images in comics as a distinct visual language, it does not explain what McCloud means in the sole instance he brings up the issue of emotions in relation to the practice of identification. Referring to the effect of distorted

or expressionistic backgrounds on our reading of “characters’ inner states,” McCloud casually notes that while “Certain patterns can produce an almost physiological effect in the viewer [...] for some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves, but to the characters they identify with” (UC 132). Although Cohn’s interpretation does not exclude the possibility of cartoons being better at provoking affective transports precisely because they are conceptually basic, McCloud’s insistence that the reader will somehow displace any emotions he or she feels onto the character suggests that something else besides plain visual recognition of whatever idea the cartoon is trying to convey is going on. Neither does an understanding of identification as the perception of abstract pictorial language account for McCloud’s employment of a psychic depth model in his recourse to the mask metaphor when he describes why we are likely to see ourselves in cartoons. ‘Universal identification’ is only able to explain why we recognise ourselves in cartoons to the extent that the cartoon serves as an accurate visual representation of a person. Mickey Mouse, as Frome also points out, has huge round ears atop his head and a rodent’s snout, features that all or most human beings presumably do not include in their mind-pictures of themselves; and yet, McCloud uses Mickey as the quintessential example of a cartoon that draws us in like a vacuum to let us travel in the comics realm.

It almost seems that McCloud writes with the assumption that his readers are sufficiently familiar with the identification process in literature and its associated ramifications, thus precluding the need to justify his use of jargon. Tellingly enough, however, in a short response to Frome that was published alongside the latter’s article in the same issue of *The Comics Journal*, McCloud admits that while he must let the debate on identification “stand as it is, for fear of simply repeating [himself],” he does “like Frome’s description of identification” as not “losing yourself to a character [but] expanding your identity to include the character” (“First

Impressions” 102). He writes: “This may actually be a better description of the deeply subjective feelings I laboured to pin down in chapter two, than much of what I actually wrote. Readers are welcome to cut and paste Frome’s phrase into my word balloons where applicable” (102). While McCloud’s endorsement of Frome’s description is helpful in that it clarifies some of what McCloud had in mind with regard to seeing yourself in a cartoon character, his admission of the difficulties he experienced in articulating his theory implies that his own idea of what exactly identification consists of is somewhat tenuous. Any discussion of what McCloud is doing with identification in *UC* must therefore consider the issue of what it means to see yourself in a character from more than just the linguistic and layman angles, especially since identification in the latter is often used as a catch-all phrase for explaining how one relates to a character or why that character is liked. Indeed, as Cohn’s interpretation highlights for us, identification means *very* different things in different fields of study, and it is worth taking the time to see where McCloud’s ideas intersect or depart from these other interpretations, in order to better understand where he is coming from.

In psychoanalytic literature, for instance, while there are “simply no agreed-upon definitions of identification [...] at either the theoretical or clinical level,” “there is agreement that the core meaning of identification is [nevertheless] simple – to be like or to become like another” (Macmillian 496). One of the first to offer a theory with a direct link to specular identification was Lacan, who argued that identification is a crucial process in the formation of the ‘I’ as experienced in psychoanalysis.

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification* [...] namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image (4).

Lacan contends that in order for any recognition of the self as an autonomous entity to occur, a child must first (mis)recognise its mirror image as itself. This mirror image is then internalised by the child, who proceeds to build its sense of self by (mis)identifying with this “specular I” (8) – the fictive mirror self that is stable, whole, and unified, and a compensation for the child having lost unity with the maternal breast. The mirror stage thus consists of an identification with an image, wherein the child projects its ideas of ‘self’ onto its mirror image, reinscribing the binary opposition of ‘self-as-not-other/ other-as-not-self’ into an illusory dichotomy of ‘self-IS-other.’ For Lacan, identification via the mirror stage is what sets the child up to take its eventual position in the Symbolic order (i.e. language) and is a vital step in the process of ego or identity formation. He and McCloud differ in that while McCloud posits a Cartesian dyad in which coherent identity is an assertion of the mind as articulated through the existence and limits of bodily senses, Lacan finds bodies to be inherently fragmented and identity to be a fantasy of the mind, unable to be sustained without an artificial projection of subjective unity modelled on the imago. McCloud’s reader, able to think of his or her face as a whole despite never having seen it and only knowing it tactilely through its constituent parts, is quite unlike Lacan’s hypothetical child, who cannot conceive of its body as whole until having visually beheld it in a mirror.

Routing McCloud’s theories through the ideas of the only academic he cites in *UC*, namely, Marshall McLuhan, in turn allows us to discern a crucial similarity between McCloud and Lacan’s notions of identification. McCloud proposes that the process of masking yourself in a cartoon is “similar” (*UC* 38) to McLuhan’s

Fig. 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of a single panel showing McCloud’s avatar gesturing towards a television screen while holding a paper mask over his face. The caption reads: “The late great Marshall McLuhan observed a similar form of non-visual awareness when people interact with inanimate objects” (38). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 4: *Understanding Comics* 38 (© Scott McCloud)

notion of media as bodily extensions insofar as both consist of extending the self into an inanimate object. [Fig. 4] To become a cartoon in a comic that you are reading, he suggests, is no different from becoming the car that you are driving, since both the car and the comic are extensions of the body that “absorb our sense of identity.” The Lacanian mirror and the comic book, when understood as types of media, both function as physical prostheses that enable the “extensions” of mirror image and the cartoon to be accepted “into our personal system” (McLuhan 50). Ultimately, McCloud and Lacan stress the notion of the ideal external image that is able to take on the conceptual weight of ‘self,’ permitting the viewer to embody or become the image. Notably enough, however, McCloud appropriates McLuhan’s notion of the technological extension without dealing with its counterpart notion of the technological amputation. McLuhan argues that since extensions demand “new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body” (49), every extension is therefore accompanied by an amputation or automatic blocking of perception that allows the body to handle the increased stresses brought about by sensory “superstimulation” (46). Comics, by McLuhan’s reckoning, are a cool print medium that belong to the world of games and “extensions of situations elsewhere” (183), simultaneously visual in their form and yet non-visual in their use of iconic art. As with other visually-based media that favour personal involvement (e.g. TV), comics draw upon the ability of the Western literate man to “act without reaction or involvement” (194), his emotional life sufficiently disassociated from his sense life such that he is able to be involved in “moving depth” (368) without becoming overly excited or agitated or aroused. Hence, while cartoons might allow the viewer to vicariously extend himself to participate in the comics world, they paradoxically also give rise to a sense of amputation and emotional numbing. McLuhan moreover warns that since to “behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in

technological form is necessarily to embrace it” (50), continual embracement of technologies in daily use inevitably produces “subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves” (51), transforming us into servo-mechanisms of the extension. With regard to McCloud’s theories, “Self-amputation [thus] forbids self-recognition” (McLuhan 47) in that while a reader might very well extend his identity into a cartoon character because it matches his mind-picture, amputation tends to prevent that reader from realising the ways in which the cartoon is modifying *him*.

The comics medium, in other words, tacitly imposes on the reader a particular way of looking at identity that is not acknowledged by McCloud. Although McCloud states in *UC* that identities are ideas on the inside that “can’t be seen, heard, smelled, touched or tasted” (*UC* 40), he nonetheless proposes in the sequel *Making Comics* that an artist with a strong command of human anatomy (i.e. body language and facial expressions) will be able to better “show [his] readers what’s going on inside [his] characters minds” by clearly showing “what’s happening on the surface” (*MC* 93). Interiority or “inner life” (*MC* 120), at least for cartoon characters, is predicated as both exterior and inferential, whereby the artist who wishes to have his readers “look into the eyes of [his] characters [...] to find a real human being looking back” must be able to clearly express the characters’ thoughts and emotions without physical subtlety getting in the way (101). David Carrier likewise highlights word balloons as a semantic convention unique to comics – revealing “what a philosopher might dream of, that another person’s thoughts be displayed indubitably and transparently” (30). Like Descartes’ pineal gland, the balloon “links things in two different worlds,” granting “spectators [who] are set apart from the depicted characters, as the mind is from the body” visual access to a verbal element that the characters can never see for themselves. As semi-omniscient readers who must furthermore place ourselves into

these empty character shells as part of the identification process, we are required to not only imaginatively adopt these expressive signifying body-masks as our own, but to also subscribe to the medium's understanding of identity as something visually displayed on the outside. In much the same way that Lacan employs a literal perception of the self as image in order to establish his child as "an individual capable of vision of the outside at the same time as having a vision of the self in the outside" (Ellis 42), so does McCloud situate identity and identification in comics within an exclusively visual gestalt by inviting his readers to think of "the face you *see* in your mind" (*UC* 35, my emphasis). In this sense, McCloud's reader is a little like Lacan's child, finding that "possession of a body image [is what] anchors and sustains our sense of identity" (Eakin 11), and desiring unity with the apparatus that offers the image. Yet if to identify with a cartoon character consists of extending your identity to become that cartoon, one cannot then avoid being likewise transformed by the cartoon that becomes a part of you. To put on a cartoon mask in order to access another world is to take all the assumptions and ideologies of that world onto yourself, even if only for the duration of the masking.

John Ellis illustrates a parallel duality of vision within the film medium in his description of cinematic identification as a process with two distinct phases – identification with the characters on screen, and identification "with the cinematic apparatus itself" (41), in which the beam of light from the projector parallels the beam of light from the eyes, creating a profound "homology between the cinematic spectacle and the activity of perception of it" (42). Here, as with comics, initial identification with the medium is the "precondition for any cinematic event" (41) and is what permits later identification with the characters. Identification with the characters, according to Ellis, is comparable to psychoanalysis to the extent that the spectator is also required to perceive himself or herself as an image outside the self. But unlike

psychoanalysis, identification with figures on a cinema screen does not involve the spectator seeing him or herself as a unified individual. Instead, this phase of cinematic identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character. It involves the identification of the public, external phantasies of the fiction with personal phantasies. Identification is therefore multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent parts of the spectator's own psyche paraded before her or her; a sense also of experiencing desire for the perfected images of individuals that are presented over and above their particular phantasy roles (43).

For Ellis, identification connotes association of the self with characters due to narcissism and the playing-out of personal fantasies, rather than automatic projection of the self into the characters. It is not determined by similitude between a spectator's mind-picture and the outer appearance of characters, but by similitude between a spectator's psyche and the roles the characters play. Congruence of self-image and character image, in other words, is only one possible factor in determining whether a character is identified with in film media; other factors like the voyeuristic desire for the ego-ideals of perfect characters (especially if presented by celebrity actors), are weighted as more credible. And while Ellis' spectators are just as "self-centred" as McCloud's readers, being able to "see [themselves] in everything" and "make the world over in [their] image" (*UC* 33), they differ in that Ellis' spectators are never compelled into identifying with an on-screen character, whereas McCloud's readers cannot help but identify with the cartoon "vacuum" that pulls them in (36). Unlike Lacan's child, the egos of Ellis' (presumably adult) spectators have already been formed, and while this does not preclude them from adopting

on-screen images as ego-ideals to model themselves upon, it not necessary for them to first look for their likeness upon a screening device in order to make subject/ object distinctions.

Identification in this instance is less a product of what the film medium does to the spectator than what the spectator does with a filmic image; if a spectator is able to see himself or herself in the image, it is also because he or she is making a personal connection, and not simply due to the image exerting, to use McCloud's word, a hypnotic "thrall" (*UC* 30) over the spectator.

There is a primary similarity between the child in front of the mirror and the spectator in front of a screen in that both are identifying with images that fascinate them. Yet as Christian Metz observes, film "differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body" (45).

The spectator is absent from the screen: contrary to the child in the mirror, he cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects that are there without him. [...]

At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am *all-perceiving* [...] because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it, in the instance, in other words, which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film) (48).

Like Ellis, Metz attests that the spectator, being "wholly outside" (49) the image medium, must first identify with the omniscient camera and the act of looking itself in order for identification with the characters to become possible, merging his consciousness with that of the camera. And to the extent that the spectator is aware of his mind as "the place where [the material of the film]

accedes to the symbolic by its inauguration as the signifier of a certain type of institutionalised social activity called the ‘cinema’,” the spectator thus identifies “with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every *there is*.”

What this in turn suggests for McCloud, who holds a similar belief that comics cannot come to life without a reader to perceive and imaginatively animate it, is that comics readers must likewise identify with the staging apparatus of the panel in order for identification with the cartoon to occur, thence entirely precluding the possibility of readers immune to the premise of the signifying authentic exterior. Both Ellis and Metz depict film as a psychoanalytic experience in which the spectator desires the image capable of functioning as an ego-ideal, presenting an ostensibly complete identity without divisions and that lacks nothing, with the cinema screen functioning like the mirror insofar as during the showing “we are [...] like the child again [...] prey to the imaginary, the double, and are so paradoxically through a real perception” (Metz 49). From such a perspective, McCloud’s reasoning of our identification with cartoons being made easier due to “our childhood fascination” with these simplified characters who themselves possess “childlike features” makes perfect sense in that cartoons can be understood to be somehow appealing to our unconscious drives and desires. The comics medium, however, is like film in that it cannot reflect the physical body of the reader, and McCloud himself is careful to qualify that no reader would ever “mistake” (UC 32) abstract cartoon shapes for a real person in the same way Lacan’s child (mis)recognises his mirror image. Moreover, to consider the nature of a reader’s interactions with the comic image/text as pure psychoanalysis would be to grossly oversimplify the ways in which readers are capable of relating to stories and the characters within those stories. While this limits the extent to which we can use psychoanalysis as means of

thinking through McCloud's theory, it does not mean that any applications thereof are without their merit. Eve Sedgwick argues in *Between Men* that "individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment" via "the play of desire and identification," and even though she is referring here to gender and class identifications in the non-imaginary world, her words nonetheless do us the service of pointing to the inextricability of the identification process from desire, in which the longing for the traditional narrative of a consistent and unitary selfhood cannot be divorced from the potential of external images that offer us psychological stability amidst the flux of experience (27). To the extent that the "underlying motivation of identification is the wish to be like an object or model" (Meissner 105), whatever the nature of that likeness, external cartoon images are able to function in such specular instances as a structuring term or ego-ideal, actively engaging the ego in the sustenance of the identity narrative.

### Chapter 3: Identification in Comics: It's About Time I Get Back to Talking About McCloud and *UC*

So just what sort of identification is McCloud referring to then, when he speaks of cartoons as possessing the power to command viewer identification and of comics readers as those who “want to be transported by fiction in the end, even if the journey is through a mirror of the world [they] already know” (*RC* 125)? While I am chary of ascribing to McCloud psychoanalytic or psychological concerns that he probably did not have in mind while penning *UC*, I would like to suggest that McCloud is nevertheless responding to the concerns of the theories I outlined above to the extent that these theories have been translated or filtered into the specific context of comics criticism. McCloud begins his manifesto by professing that his aim is to redefine comics as more than “crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare” (*UC* 3). Deciding upon “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” as “the only definition [of comics] we’re likely to need” (9), he proceeds to humorously dramatise his strategy in a panel depicting a dictionary style entry of the word ‘comics’ that highlights his newly coined definition while obscuring the more well-known but decidedly less attractive definitions with a speckled screentone pattern<sup>1</sup>. [Fig. 5] While McCloud’s confident declaration of the first definition as the only one of any importance is itself debatable, his reasons for doing so remain clear. In order to rescue the medium from ignominy, he must first give the lie to the stereotypes surrounding comics, or at the very least literally cover them up in order that his own definition might better stand out. I draw attention here to the fourth and most damaging of the definitions listed – “Corruptor of our Nation’s Youth” – which directly references Fredric Wertham’s 1954 anti-comics diatribe, *Seduction of the Innocent*. A controversial best-seller in its

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the screentoned portion: “2. Superheroes in bright, colourful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world, in violent sensational pulse-pounding action sequences!! 3. Cute, cuddly bunnies, mice and rolypoly bears, dancing to and fro, Hippity Hop, Hippity Hop. 4. Corruptor of our Nation’s Youth.”

Fig. 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two consecutive panels, the first showing McCloud's new definition of comics and the second showing McCloud's avatar leaning out of the panel and gesturing to the first. The caption reads "I admit, this isn't the sort of thing that comes up a lot in casual conversation-" (9). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 5: *Understanding Comics* 9 (© Scott McCloud)

time, the book was central in spearheading "a national campaign against comic books [...] as a major cause of juvenile delinquency" (Schechter 230), eventually leading to a Congressional investigation of the industry and the subsequent

creation of the still extant Comics Code Authority. In the book, Wertham not only calls for children to be "protected against the *corrupting* influence of comic books" (4-5) in promoting criminal and immoral behaviour, but also seeks to warn against allowing children to be so "*corrupted* by comic books that they do not want to read anything else, to the detriment of their ability to acquire proper reading habits" (279). Publishers of comic books are in turn derided as "*corruptors* of children" and comic book adaptations of classic literature are described as "Shakespeare and the child [being] *corrupted* at the same time" (143, my emphases). Despite remaining judicious enough to note that "[a] child is not a simple unit which exists outside of its living social ties" and that one cannot ignore the greater "social virus of a harmful environment" (118) that allows for the spread of harmful media like comics and television, Wertham is nevertheless adamant that people ought to be on their guard against the "direct effect" (220) that comic books have upon children. He describes the simple psychological mechanism behind that direct effect as that of "plain imitation," with the child mimicking "the contents of the stories in [real] life, either in thought or in action" (114), and goes on to contend that underlying the conscious imitation is "a kind of subconscious imitation called *identification*" (116).

Identification, according to Wertham, has little to do with “rational resemblance or logical comparison,” let alone physical similitude to a cartoon image, since “[what] is important is the emotional part of the reaction” (116). It consists of the child being “emotionally stirred” in pleasurable ways that lead him to identify with the superhero or Nietzschean strong-man of the comic, “the figure that is active, successful, [who] dominates a situation and satisfies an instinct [in the child], even though the child may only half understand what that instinct means” (116). Wertham, however, is surprisingly vague on how identification itself takes place – what about the strong-man the child imitates and how identification changes the child once he puts the comic book down (Frome 85). Despite admitting that “other factors in a child’s life” mean that “Identification [in] itself may or may not lead to imitative action,” he glosses over the question of how identification works by continuing to assure his reader that exposure to “scenes of sadism, sex and crime” will no doubt “arouse the child’s emotions” and lead to “passivity,” “daydreams,” and “masturbatory or delinquent actions” (Wertham 117). Based on what little exposition he does provide on the subject though, we may nevertheless draw two conclusions. First of all, Wertham’s idea of identification differs from those brought up in the previous section in that although it too deals with the psychoanalytic notion of the viewer enthralled by the image world and its inhabitants, Wertham’s child is motivated by affective transports that directly satisfy his aggressive and erotic instincts rather than by any unconscious desire for selfhood or wholeness. Secondly, for Wertham, comic books “are not a mirror of the individual child’s mind” but “a mirror of [his] environment” (117). Since they do not reflect either the child’s body or his mind-picture, they afford a child zero opportunity for introspection or recognition of the sort psychoanalytic or film identification provides. But since they *do* reflect his environment, comic books are ideal classical conditioning tools, containing both the stimulus of behaviour

models that provide “pleasure” (116) when identified with and the unconditioned stimulus of a microcosmic world derived from the child’s particular “social reality” (117), hence making it in theory extremely easy for a child to pick up and reproduce unsavoury comic book story content in the real world. As Wertham himself obliquely puts it when referring to an eleven-year old female reader apprehended for stealing: “[her] ego-ideal formation [has been] interfered with by the fascination of the sadistic female comic-book heroines. Comic books do not permit these children even in their imagination to view a non-violent life. [...] She has incorporated the comic-book morale into her character” (99). Wertham’s child is an utterly passive viewer with next to no agency, indiscriminately absorbing whatever image media comes his way, and with what sense of self he does possess being undermined thanks to his identification with insidious comic book characters. Ultimately, Wertham’s image of the innocent child seduced by comics into delinquency was to prevail in the popular imagination over the next several decades, Owen Edwards writing in a 1976 essay of the “brutalising effect” of “socially reprehensible” comics that glorified violence as something to be laughed at, in which “identification” was what drew readers to be “directly implicated” in the action, “participat[ing] more directly in the value-structure which the *Beano* and the *Dandy* impose on him” (98).

Such is the behemoth that McCloud must slay if he is to succeed in his mission to restore credibility to comics. Whatever new understanding of comics he proposes must be able, at the least, to defuse the worst of Wertham’s claims, and Wertham’s name, as such, is understandably never once mentioned in *UC*. Neither does McCloud draw upon psychoanalytic processes to

explain his own theory of identification, though as

I have outlined in the previous section, there remain noticeable thematic similarities – the viewer who is enthralled by images; who sees himself or herself in those images; and for whom the body image or mind-picture serves as the crux of one’s identity. Instead, the first thing McCloud does in his redefinition of comics is to rhetorically

Fig. 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of a single panel showing a transparent ‘comics’ jar filled with a dark liquid containing ‘writers, artists, trends, genres, styles, subject matter, themes.’ The caption read: “The artform – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (6). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 6: *Understanding Comics* 6 (© Scott McCloud)

separate “form from content” (UC 5), drawing a transparent jar containing dark liquid – the liquid representing comics “content” and the jar representing the artform, “a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (6). [Fig. 6] McCloud’s avatar proceeds to have a swig of the liquid before dramatically spitting and coughing it all out, wryly remarking to the reader as he recovers that while “we all have different tastes,” “the trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger” (6). Ergo, even if comics content makes us sick, this does not mean that we cannot appreciate the form – the gleaming jar that remains, placed strategically alongside the gleaming jars of other legitimate media like ‘theatre,’ ‘film,’ ‘video,’ and ‘music.’ McCloud’s “aesthetic surgery” (5), realised in the metaphor of form-as-vessel, consequently allows him to tacitly disown everything that Wertham finds offensive about comics as mere content that is irrelevant to the true nature of comics as “sequential art” (7). If Wertham deems superhero figures and romance and crime stories horrific for presenting children with “a false picture of love and life” (Wertham 39), the fact that he does so becomes simply an issue of his distaste for the work of certain authors, and does not mean that all comics are “bad for reading” and “bad for children’s minds and emotions” (10). Having discreetly buried the bogeyman of comics as the

‘Corruptor of our Nation’s Youth,’ McCloud is now free to treat his own definition of ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence’ as the only formal definition of comics worthy of looking at. By extension, he is now able to eclipse Wertham’s proposition of identification as subconscious imitation by offering up his own replacement theory – one whose workings sound close enough to the ones circulating in psychoanalytic and film discourse, using the associated vocabulary and imagery – without ever explicitly acknowledging or examining the validity of the unsavoury historical corpus he is building on.

In the panels where he describes the rationale behind his identification process, McCloud starts with a picture that exemplifies “our childhood fascination with the cartoon” (*UC* 36): a child gazing open-mouthed at a television screen that shows a smiling Mickey Mouse face. The most curious aspect of this panel is perhaps the fact that McCloud uses a television screen rather than an actual comics panel. Although McCloud and McLuhan both place television and comics in the same ‘cool’ media category on account of their mutual use of low-definition iconographic images, McLuhan does not believe that comics can command the same soporific depth participation levels that an electronic medium like television easily achieves (McLuhan 182). McCloud’s tandem use of anaesthetic television and a child viewer in a book meant to promote comics as more than kiddie fare might hence seem counterintuitive, unless one takes into account the extensive amount of idiomatic borrowing he is doing in order to pass off his theory of identification as plausible. Notably, McCloud draws his child alone and in a darkened room, so engrossed that the entire world beyond the parameters of the television closet has vanished. [Fig. 7] As we see in the subsequent panel, the child is also sitting close enough to the television that the screen occupies his entire field of vision, his head aligned with Mickey’s such that it almost

looks as though Mickey's ears have been transplanted onto the child's head. Here, the screen evokes for McCloud's child a viewing experience more akin to that of cinema than the television – surrounded in darkness, the watching uninterrupted by conversation and other daily activities, the viewer spatially subdued by the big screen. The cinema, attests Lev Manovich, is where "identification is most intense" (96) due to the tendency of the viewing conditions to overwhelm the viewer's sense of self. By deploying a television screen in a cinematic context, McCloud is able to recruit the immersive kinetic viewing experience of film and the hypnotic attraction of the television towards his explanation of identification with cartoons, only that his viewer, as shown in the second panel, is always prevented from fully becoming Mickey by the protective scaffold of the television closet and the borders of the television screen. Even if his head looks as if it has sprouted Mickey's ears, as the first panel makes clear, his body is nevertheless grounded in reality while the ears remain firmly on the screen. Although he claims the cartoon to be a vacuum that automatically pulls us in, McCloud stresses that the child's identity cannot be overpowered by that of the cartoon's for two simple reasons: one, like the film viewer, the child remains wholly outside the image medium; and two, the cartoon, as claimed in the vessel

Fig. 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of three consecutive panels on two different rows on the same page. The first panel showed McCloud's avatar addressing the reader with a child staring at a television screen in the background. The second panel showed the child from behind as he stared directly at the screen. The third panel showed a negative outline of Mickey's head with swirling white arrow lines pointing at the head. The captions read: "I believe 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). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 7: *Understanding Comics* 36 (© Scott McCloud)

metaphor, is only a form – a vehicle or “empty shell” (*UC* 36) that is inherently devoid of life and power. The third panel, in particular, emphasizes this metaphor with its negative colour outline of Mickey’s head, the blank space both connoting the idea of the cartoon as pure vessel while strategically inviting readers to recognise and ‘fill up’ the cartoon form with Mickey’s features in a direct execution of McCloud’s related claim that the cartoon has no life but what the readers choose to put there. The television screen, by reflecting in its polished surface an image that is not the viewer but which the viewer is nevertheless able to see himself in, elicits a fresh suggestiveness about the cartoon image that the *mise en abyme* of a comics panel would have failed to deliver<sup>2</sup>. Identification in comics, as McCloud wants us to believe, is visually shown (but not proved) to be about expanding your identity to include the character rather than losing yourself to a character.

This still leaves us with the quandary of McCloud’s conviction that the essence of identification is rooted in the visual congruence between cartoons and one’s personal mind-picture. One possible way of resolving this problem that I brought up in my undergraduate thesis comes from Aislin Stott, who suggests that McCloud’s theory of identification is inextricable from the separate process of universal identification (i.e. representation). She spells out the masking effect using mathematical set theory.

A simple ‘smiley face’ denotes the set of things with round faces, two eyes placed just so, and a mouth beneath the eyes – the intersection of the sets of round-faced things, two-eyed things and things with mouths. Almost all human beings – therefore, almost all readers – will fall into this intersection [and will thus easily identify with it. As] additional details are added to the graphic representation, the image denotes the

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<sup>2</sup> If the irony of using a television to prove a point about the uniqueness of comics passes mostly unnoticed, I like to think that it is because comics do allow for more in-depth participation than McLuhan thinks them capable of.

intersection of an increasingly large number of sets. As each set is added, more individuals are excluded from the denotation, and the likelihood that the reader regularly interacts with something that falls within the intersection, or falls within the intersection themselves, decreases. Decreasing cardinality correlates with decreasing familiarity. Thus Scott McCloud's 'masking' effect can be explained as a function of familiarity: readers are more likely to identify with images that are more familiar to them (6).

In other words, readers are apt to identify with cartoony images instead of photorealistic images since the likelihood of their personal mind-pictures (i.e. the picture familiar to only themselves) falling within the descriptive sets of a cartoony image is much higher than it would be for a photorealistic image. According to Stott's logic, readers would be able to identify better with a simple stick figure than with McCloud's avatar in *UC*, since more people would fit into the intersecting sets of things that have round heads and upright bodies than the intersecting sets of things that have black-haired bespectacled heads and male bodies dressed in checkered shirts. Even fewer readers would be able to identify with the more physically detailed image of Doctor Manhattan from *Watchmen*, since the sets of things that have bald heads with white eyes and a hydrogen atom symbol burnt into the forehead and blue-skinned muscular male bodies ensure that an extremely small number of readers would share the same set space as the Doctor. For Stott, images "never exclusively pick out one unique object," making it "by no means the case that they must always have the same referent: they effectively denote the set of all individuals that resemble the drawing" (6). Taking up McCloud's assumption that our identity is indeed rooted in one's body-image, identifying with a cartoon thus approximates to being able to visually signify one's mind-picture into the same set space being occupied by that cartoon. In this case, the cartoon would offer a higher chance for successful identification due to it being so

simple and basic in appearance that it possesses multiple possible referents, unlike a photograph or photorealistic image, which would possess only one or a few possible referents.

McCloud is hence able to overwrite Wertham's theory by claiming a sighted model of identification that has nothing to do with the mimicry of emotional transports, adopting from psychoanalytic literature both the model of specular absorption and the theme of the child fascinated by mirror images but leaving out the connotative notions of misrecognition and desire. Identification is reinterpreted to be a much safer process, with McCloud's adept use of imagery and metaphor allowing him to highlight both the spontaneity and safeness of seeing oneself inside a cartoon during comics reading. Dylan Horrocks observes, on the other hand, that the vessel metaphor relies on essentialist conceptions that delineate new borders around comics by assembling a "set of values about what comics *should* be" (5). One thing it does, he suggests, is to privilege pictures as the indispensable form of comics while dismissing everything else, including the speech balloons and the captions, as contingent content: "it doesn't *have* to contain words to be comics" (*UC* 8). That is, in order for McCloud's definition of comics to succeed, it is imperative for "the pictures to *dominate* the words" (Horrocks 5). Horrocks explains that the moment the words take control of the narrative from the pictures, "we are cast out of the realm of comics and into that of illustrated text," rendering McCloud unable to hail the independence of comics as "a new language" (6) comprised entirely of visual iconography by suggesting that comics actually belong on the same level as other hybrids of graphic art and prose fiction. I would add here that another thing the vessel metaphor does by privileging pictures as the essence of comics is that it then allows McCloud to tautologically recognise cartoons as the singular device that differentiates identification in comics from identification in any other media. Throughout *UC*, McCloud extols the uniqueness of comics for their harnessing of "cartoons to

command viewer involvement and identification” (204). Yet unless he first distinguishes identification in comics by grounding it in the medium’s specialised use of pictorial images (e.g. cartoons), as opposed to non-pictorial factors common to all storytelling media that are usually conveyed through words (e.g. narrative plot; character personality), any claims he makes towards comics as a distinct medium deserving of consideration will necessarily be weakened by his failure to provide cogent examples of things that *only* comics can do. If McCloud finds comics exceptional for their adroit use of cartoon art to promote reader involvement and identification, it is because he has already redefined comics via the vessel metaphor such that cartoon art is the only pictorial device left to appropriate as exceptional to comics. Without the vessel metaphor in place, McCloud becomes unable to not only show why comics deserve our attention (i.e. because they are the only medium to utilise static cartoon images that we all automatically identify with), but also why cartoons are safe to identify with (i.e. because they are only hollow vessels without life of their own).

The vessel metaphor, however, is only one of the two that McCloud uses to explicate his theory of identification. The other is the mask metaphor, which works hand in hand with the vessel metaphor to highlight and expand on the themes of identity transformation and protection. A crucial exception to Stott’s model that I took note of but did not enquire further into during my undergraduate thesis was the issue of what would happen if a reader were *still* able to fit into the intersecting space despite an increased number of sets. For instance, Sally Jupiter of *Watchmen* is drawn by Gibbons in a semi-realistic style that adheres to realistic physical proportions while making use of hatched shadowing, accented line art, and flat colours. By contrast, the Tijuana Bible art of her superhero alter-ego, Silk Spectre, uses a cartoony style that has simplified facial

features, minimal texturing and shading, and black-and-white colouring. [Fig. 8] According to both McCloud and Stott's readings of identification, a reader ought to identify more easily with the Silk Spectre cartoon than with the

more realistically drawn image of Sally.

In the event that a reader, however, happens to match Sally's appearance as an aged white woman with wrinkled skin, curly white hair, and blue eyes, the same

logic then also suggests that this reader would not be visually ostracised in the

way that readers who do not fit into the increased number of descriptive sets attached to Sally's image would be. Instead, this reader would presumably be able to identify with Sally's image just as easily as she would with the Silk Spectre cartoon, since Sally's image would remain representative of the reader's physical appearance despite its greater realism quotient. Such an outcome, if realised, would directly contradict McCloud's Barthesian belief that to "look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face," including one's own, is to "see it as the face of another" (UC 36). Although Stott is careful to quote Charles Goodman in pointing out that "no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship" (Goodman 5) between a sign and its signified class since resemblance is a symmetrical relation whereas denotation is not, her inability to account for what happens to the reader when her model is put into practice severely

Fig. 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two panels on the same page, the first showing Laurie reading the page of the Tijuana Bible with the pornographic Silk Spectre cartoon, and the second showing Sally Jupiter looking up at Laurie. The captions read: "Mother, this is vile!" / "Hm?" (II.8). Original source: Moore, Alan and Gibbons, Dave. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1986. Print.

Fig. 8: *Watchmen* II.8 (© DC Comics)

weakens her argument that McCloud's identification theory can be qualified via natural language semantics<sup>3</sup>.

I find that the key to resolving the incongruities in both Stott's and McCloud's work lies in their mutual use of masking as a structuring term. Stott's only demonstration of how the ambiguity effect of the cartoon image allows for increased identification is taken from Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*. In this comic, the enigmatic protagonist, V, is swathed from head to toe in a Guy Fawkes costume and mask that utterly "obliterat[es] his personal identity" (Stott 7) and is denoted by the image of a man wearing a Guy Fawkes costume and mask. Stott, however, argues that the image of V is "crucially ambiguous [in that] it does not denote a unique individual, or even a male person" (8), since there is no change in Lloyd's art even after Evie, V's female protégé, has inherited the mask and costume following V's death. "The costume so effectively hides individual features that any individual wearing it can be denoted by the same graphic image," which allows Stott to present the descriptive semantics for an image of V as the sets of person and every person wearing a Guy Fawkes costume. Identifying with V by signifying one's mind-picture into the space he occupies is therefore extremely simple, for "we are all members of the first set and the second (and, therefore, the intersection) is as easy to slip into as pulling on a mask" (8). With V's costume covering up every part of his body, the issue of a reader still being able to fit into the intersecting space despite an increased number of sets is negated by the fact that the degree of a reader's physical similitude to the cartoon is no longer even an issue, since the ontological weight of identity is no longer being carried by the body but by the clothes adorning that body. Stott goes on to suggest

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<sup>3</sup> Stott defines 'to denote' as 'to stand in for something symbolically' and contends that resemblance is not crucial to an image's denotation since: "[while] Stephen Harper *resembles* a political cartoon of himself as much as the cartoon resembles him, but it is nevertheless the case that the cartoon *denotes* Harper and Harper does not denote the cartoon" (5, my emphasis). She does not clarify why her model nonetheless relies upon resemblance.

in a footnote that this ambiguity effect does not apply to costumed characters such as superheroes since such images only have one referent – “it is just as absurd for an onlooker in Gotham to assert that that fellow in the bat-shaped hood, cape, and suit with Batman’s logo on the chest isn’t Batman as it would be to assert in words that ‘Batman isn’t Batman’” (7). I would argue, however, based on her use of V as a case study, that this is not the case. Rather, since the public identity or idea of Batman, as with V, is conveyed entirely by the outfit, regardless of the personal identity of the wearer, so does the image of Batman denote every person in a Batman costume, whether that person is Bruce Wayne or an imposter or the reader. The wearing of clothing as a means of identity transformation, as epitomised in the act of masking, changes the theme of identification in comics from loss of self to that of disguise – “to be someone else by changing only *this* detail” (Barthes 256), without any risk of losing oneself. [Fig. 9]

Fig. 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of a single panel showing three versions of a unnamed male person in the same pose, each version wearing a different set of clothing. The caption reads: “Our identities and awareness are invested in many inanimate objects every day. Our clothes, for example, can trigger numerous transformations in the way others see us and in the way we see ourselves” (38). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 9: *Understanding Comics* 38 (© Scott McCloud)

Without relying upon masked characters as exemplars, Stott’s reading of McCloud’s masking effect cannot hold water due to the difficulty of linguistically abstracting a reader’s body into the form of a signifying cartoon. Similarly for McCloud, only by first establishing the premise of masking as the de facto state of human existence, can he then discriminate between cartoon and human bodies as discrete entities, with the vessel metaphor emphasizing form over content in the former and the mask metaphor emphasizing content (i.e. mind-picture of face) over form (i.e. physical face) in the latter. While Stott simply renders reader and cartoon bodies docile and analysable by concealing them both under a layer of cartoon clothing, McCloud goes

a step further by instructing his readers in the art of imaginative masking in order to assure them of the integrity of their identities. We readers, as McCloud blithely informs us, are unable to ever see our own faces, but this condition does not prevent us from nevertheless safely extending our identities into the inanimate cartoon shells in front of us during identification – after all, we manage quite well behind the face-masks we all wear as a default state of being (*UC* 34).

“Removal of the face” by the wearing of a mask, as Warwick and Cavallaro note, is what “releases the body” (130) to act while ensuring the anonymity of the wearer, allowing McCloud’s reader to safely enter the world of the cartoon. And to the extent that a reader’s face-mask also serves to prevent his or her sense of self from being taken over by the cartoons he or she identifies and interacts with, the mask simultaneously functions for McCloud as both a regulatory strategy and a subversive potentiality, “separat[ing] the individual body from other bodies, whilst also at the same time connecting it to them” (3).

Metaphors do not simply function as descriptive models. Instead, by determining in advance the values and assumptions that constitute the narrative structure and idioms through which we understand comics, metaphors profoundly influence the ways in which we read and respond to the medium. The mask metaphor, in this case, permits McCloud to linguistically reframe identification as a form of “vestimentary play” (Barthes 257) in which the reader’s identity remains safe and intact under the character body-mask. I use the word play here in a dual sense, referring to both the dramatic performance in which to play means to act the part of a character, and the game of Fashion in which to play means to use clothing as a means of participating in the transformational myth of being at once oneself and another. For only by treating identification in comics as a masking process in which the burden of identity apparently rests upon the signifying clothing prop instead of the reader wearing the mask, can McCloud

preclude the possibility of the reader's self being undermined by simply pointing to the theatricality of the identity performance taking place – implying that the identity being staged is just for show and can be as easily disposed of as one might strip off any regular piece of clothing.

#### Chapter 4: Some Emotional Affairs: a Brief Look at What McCloud Isn't Talking About in *UC* and What That Has to Do with the Theatre as Well

I have not yet mentioned how McCloud handles Wertham's belief that identification consists of a child imitating characters who stir up his emotions, for the main reason that McCloud himself avoids the issue of affective transports altogether, save in the aforementioned instance. To reiterate in more contextual detail: in a later chapter of *UC*, McCloud makes the case that comics are "an art of the invisible" where one sense can speak for all five, due to a vital combination of expressive line art, cultural symbols, and synaesthetic icons that readers can imaginatively set to "work by bringing the full power of [their] own experiences to bear on the world [their] eyes report" (136). While his concern is with readers being able to perceive and interpret the emotions that comics artists are trying to express via images, McCloud states in a section on backgrounds that certain background patterns will produce "an almost physiological effect in the viewer [but] for some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves, but to the characters they identify with" (132). Having spoken earlier in the chapter about the "expressive potential" inherent in an artist's drawing style that grants his or her work particular emotional overtones, McCloud's claim makes a certain amount of sense (124). For example, if Spiegelman employs a surrealistic and grotesque wood-cut style in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* in order to "depict a true-life horror story" (*UC* 126), then any negative affects or physiological reactions that the art evokes from its readers (e.g. dizziness or guilt) could plausibly be said to really belong to its characters, Artie and Vladek, who are both depicted to be experiencing considerable emotional and physical duress<sup>4</sup>. [Fig. 10]

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<sup>4</sup> Just to be clear: *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* is a four page auto/biographical comix done by Spiegelman in 1972 about his mother's suicide and is featured in *Maus I* (1986) as a comix-within-comics. In *Maus*, Art (i.e. Spiegelman) is shocked to discover that Vladek has come across this particular sample of his early work and subsequently reads through the whole comix along with the reader as part of the main *Maus* plot. Both of them are characters in *Prisoner*, with Art identified in the work as either 'Artie' or 'Arthur.'

The problem with McCloud using *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* as a case study, however, is that its readers in *Maus* do not react to it in the way that he predicts they will. Vladek is

“upset” (*Maus I* 99) by the memories of

Anja that his reading has triggered but does not shift the onus for his reaction onto his grieving cartoon representation, whereas Art himself remains blasé. The most overt physiological reaction comes

from Mala, who confesses to nearly fainting when she first saw the comix,

though as it turns out, she was moved by the emotional rawness and intimacy of the overall story and not specifically by its art style: “I thought I’d *faint*, I was so shocked. It was so... so *personal!*” (104). Granted, we are not informed of whether emotional displacements are taking place when the characters of *Maus* read *Prisoner*, and it must be agreed that in a comics narrative, the art is inextricable from the overall emotional impact delivered by a story. Yet given how none of the characters in *Maus* assign their feelings to the characters in *Prisoner* whom they are presumably identifying with, but instead acknowledge their reactions as indubitably their own – “I read it... and I cried;” “I was so shocked” (104, my emphases) – McCloud’s claim falls short of the comix he cites in support of it. Whatever “internal effects” (*UC* 42) that *Prisoner* has wrought on the emotions of the characters in *Maus*, the emotions that result are certainly not being ascribed to the characters in the comix. Nevertheless, there are at least two possible ways to rationalise McCloud’s claim. The first is to recall the premise behind the masking effect that comics readers are not expected to identify with backgrounds but with characters, which could

Fig. 10 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consists of two consecutive panels showing the *Prisoner* character of Artie stumbling out of a doctor’s office and outside the doors of Mount Zion Funeral home, the world spinning out of joint all around him. The caption reads: “I felt nauseous... the guilt was overwhelming!” (102). Original source: Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. Print.

Fig. 10: *Maus I* 102 (© Art Spiegelman)

imply that when the backgrounds do actually work to convey emotions, readers are somehow unable to recognise the source. The second is to once again consider the cartoon as a vessel, since this would allow for any emotions aroused by the background or characters to be mentally (if not actually) imputed to the cartoon form. The cartoon, being a container and an outer covering for the body, would become dually a means of transport within the comics realm as well as a protective receptacle for the reader ensconced within. Although I find the second to be the more satisfying of the two because it blunts Wertham's accusation by providing readers with an inanimate external object for them to safely vent any suspect or harmful feelings onto, neither way actually clarifies why the readers themselves would be attributing the emotions aroused by their viewing of expressionistic backgrounds specifically onto the characters they are identifying with.

It is important to note before I move on that besides McCloud, Wertham, and Frome, the only other prominent voice on identification in comics is Martin Barker, who discredits the process altogether by claiming that it is "not a concept, but a focal point where a number of social and political concerns have come together" (97). Identification, he argues, is but the extrusion of a paternal socio-political model that seeks to control the "inexplicable volatility" (103) of the working class by mediating their access to "imaginative [mass] media" (112).

Baldly, in the 1920-30s the science of psychology was increasingly recruited, especially in the United States, to validate the worries of those who felt that first cinema, then television, were corrupting the population. Psychologists sought to name the mechanism of influence. Although often suspicious of psychoanalysis, they borrowed terms from there: notably 'vicarious learning,' and then 'identification.' There is nothing intrinsically

wrong with borrowing concepts from other fields, or with giving names to processes you want to investigate. But what if your interests skew your research? (112)

Barker asserts that in seeking to prove the specular link between the viewing of image media and the committing of socially degenerate acts, psychologists like Wertham appropriated from psychoanalytic theories the term of ‘identification’ and all its associated connotations of visually predicated ego-formation, in which the viewer experiences a loss of self-awareness and rationality due to the projection of either the self or the psyche onto the image-figure(s). Since identifying with a character meant seeing either oneself or parts of one’s psyche reflected on the page, Barker believes that the psychologists concluded that readers were therefore fantastically putting themselves in the place of a character, replacing “his or her personal identity [...] with the identity and role of the character within the text” (Cohen 251). In other words, readers were imaginatively ‘becoming’ characters, to the extent that in a case of strong identification, the reader would even cease “to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member [...] temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopt[ing] the perspective of the character with whom he or she identifies.” Specular identification in comics was construed as “a piece of *covert doing*” (Barker 105), a “trick process” (94) that allowed harmful content to be smuggled into the brain by way of mental imitation, teaching the reader to reproduce “many elements of the behaviour including the *emotions* he attributes to the character” (Maccoby and Wilson 76, my emphasis).

Barker’s explanation could be said to partly complement Wertham’s in that it describes how identification in comics is based on imitation – “the reader imitates the emotions of the character she identifies with” (Frome 85) – but Frome points out a serious problem with such an interpretation. For example, a reader of *Watchmen* will know from the panels preceding Rorschach’s capture that show an anonymous tipster phoning the Manhattan police department

that Rorschach is walking into a trap, while Rorschach himself remains oblivious of his precarious situation. Assuming identification to be a form of emotional imitation, a reader who identifies with Rorschach would have to wait until Rorschach realises that he has been betrayed before feeling any anxiety or fear or excitement. But instead we “feel fear as soon as we know that the character is in danger, whether or not the character knows it” (Frome 85), since “our relation with the character is always mediated by the point of view from which s/he is presented” (Barker 106). Indeed, it takes “special effort to ensure that we only ever know just as much as the character” (Barker 106), which makes it extremely difficult to interpret identification as simple emotional mimicry if we are responding to the character’s situation rather than the character’s actual emotional state. Nor is it enough to accept identification as a type of general imitation of the character that results in diminishment of self-consciousness and a reduced ability to appraise things rationally. Barker 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 judgement that they exhibit” (109), meaning that identification with a rational character who has a firm sense of self (e.g. a Nietzschean strong-man) would result in the logical impossibility of a reader who mimics those qualities but gains immunity from being altered by comics’ content. Identification therefore cannot be said to be based on character imitation and to this end, he declares that given how “casual and incidental” (97) the explanations behind identification are, the term is at best “reactionary, unscientific, and has no further place in serious studies of the possible influences of the mass media” (112). Nevertheless, as Frome notices, Barker only attacks the idea that identification can alter a reader for the worse without explaining why the concept is theoretically empty per se, consequently making it possible that “identification does exist but cannot [or does not] have significant effects

on the reader” in the way that critics expect it to, leaving the term open for McCloud and ourselves to regard as “meaningful unless otherwise demonstrated” (86).

What I find most interesting about Barker’s deconstruction of the identification process is his offhand remark that without a psychoanalytic foundation that allows psychologists to believe that identification in comics leads to a loss of self-awareness and rationality, “all we are left with is ‘empathy’,” which has “none of the power which ‘identification’ claimed for itself” (109). Frome disagrees with Barker on this point, contending that “empathy isn’t quite right either” given that the readers are independently responding to a character’s situation rather than reproducing the character’s emotions, which implies for him that something “other than empathy or sympathy is occurring [during] identification” (Frome 86). By contrast, an independent response to another’s situation in lieu of emotional imitation is precisely what Adam Smith believes sympathy to consist of, arising “[not] so much from the view of the passion [in someone else], as from that of the situation which excites it” (10). According to Smith, in a process that sounds somewhat analogous to McCloud’s theory of identification,

[since] we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation [...] By the imagination we place ourselves in [another’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and *become in some measure the same person* with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them (8, my emphasis).

Smith explains sympathy as the process of imagining oneself in someone else’s situation such that one mimetically becomes that person, not by copying his feelings but by copying “the

impressions of our own senses” – that is, the re-presentation of “what would be our own [feelings], if we were in his case” (8). But unlike McCloud, becoming the other for Smith is a procedure dependent on one’s imaginative faculty rather than on visual perception. This is because Smith holds that there is no guarantee of our being moved by the sight of “our brother upon the rack” for “as long as we ourselves are at our ease” (A. Smith 8) and not actually suffering along with him, such that it is only through what David Marshall calls “the act of identification” that sympathy is able to take place at all (Marshall 171). Identification, contra Frome, is figured as the constituent process that allows sympathy to occur rather than as something that precludes it, since both procedures require us to “face a fiction [and] imagine that we are persons who can be only representations to us” (Marshall 171). For in the same way that McCloud finds the cartoon unable to convey its “message” (*UC* 37) unless the reader imaginatively reaches beyond himself and extends his identity into the image, bringing it to life, so does Smith maintain that the only way for a spectator to realise a little of what someone else is feeling is to carry “beyond [his] own person” (A. Smith 8) by imaginatively adopting as his own what he thinks the other person is experiencing. Despite their differing ideas about the factors that give rise to it, identification could hence be said to function for Smith and McCloud as an inherently theatrical construction: not only because it enables us to “transport ourselves in fancy” and “imagine ourselves acting the part” (A. Smith 64) of another, but also because it provides us with a “theatrical model which pictures the self as an actor who stands besides himself and represents the characters of both spectator and spectacle” (Marshall 176).

In this sense, Barker’s dismissal of empathy as a viable means of clarifying what happens when we identify would seem to have more to do with his consideration of empathy and identification as entirely discrete processes than with any ostensible incapacity of identification

to work once robbed of its stupefying psychoanalytic powers. Empathy, like sympathy, is often understood as a character engagement process whereby to empathise *is* to first identify – to have an affective and / or cognitive response that involves “projecting oneself from one’s own first-person perspective into another’s position as subject, comprehending the other’s experience as if one’s own” (D. Smith 118). If Barker therefore finds that empathy cannot account for the scope of media influence attributed to identification, it is perhaps because he has already rhetorically excised the very process that makes it possible in empathy to imaginatively reach out to another and “transcend the limits of our own world” (Krasner 256). The obvious difficulty with treating identification as a parallel and integral process of both empathy and sympathy, however, is that it tends to obfuscate the already hazy distinctions between the three. As Bence Nanay complains: “Sometimes we say that we identify with a fictional character when we are just like her, or when we empathise with her, or when we sympathise with her [...] It is not clear which of these notions identification encompasses” (254). And as with identification, I have found in the writing of this paper that the exact definitions of empathy and sympathy change and coalesce depending on the field of study and the theorist looking at them. Nevertheless, what the various descriptions do suggest for me is that empathy, sympathy, and identification are different but closely related processes that operate on a logic of mirroring, requiring a person to imagine himself or herself to be inside another’s situation and so to mentally play the part of the other as based upon the “imaginary versions of the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes [he or she] would have in that [person’s] situation” (Currie 153). For the purposes of this paper, I would thus contend that identification, whether it leads to sympathy or empathy or neither, may be read as a process contingent upon imaginative acting out in which the self is theatricalised in its relation to others, entering the space of the theatre insofar as “the person whom I properly call myself” is

dramatising a spectacle in which the self plays two different persons: the spectatorial 'I' who watches 'myself' performing a re-presentation of someone else (Marshall 176).

Applying the notion of identification as a theatrical construction to comics criticism in turn permits us to make a few observations. The first is that contrary to Barker's and Frome's expectations, identification in comics does involve imitation and emotional transports – just not of the sort that Wertham brought up, since the reader is independently copying and responding to his or her own impressions of what characters would feel in a given situation as part of the reading process, instead of simply mimicking the shown behaviour or emotions of the characters for purposes of self-gratification. The second is that if authors (e.g. Spiegelman and Ware, as mentioned in the introduction) find cartoons to be particularly effective at eliciting affective responses from comics readers, this apparent ability might have as much to do with the underlying resemblance between empathy/ sympathy and identification as with the simplified form of the cartoon. To imagine yourself in somebody else's situation or body, as Adam Smith asserts, is to assume and experience a diminished version of whatever you think that person is feeling. And since cartoons do excel at signifying a character's emotional state due to their conceptually basic form, the deduction that a reader engaged in imaginative acting out would take his emotional cues all the more readily if they were clearly delivered to him by a cartoon is not an unreasonable one to make.

The third observation is that McCloud's conjecture of readers attributing any feelings they experience upon viewing expressionistic backgrounds to the characters they are identifying with can also now be couched in terms of the traditional ontological division between character and actor, on top of that of spectator and spectacle (e.g. sufferer). More than just an audience member who is reading a character, the comics reader now exists as both a character within the

panel and an actor who mentally plays the role of that character from outside the panel. In the same way that the “awareness that one is not oneself suffering” (Nussbaum 327) is capable of forestalling complete emotional correspondence in either sympathy or empathy by reinforcing the epistemological gap between spectator and sufferer, so does the reader’s awareness that he or she is not really the cartoon character assume a vital distinction of self and other that precludes the possibility of the actor’s and character’s identities merging. Consequently, any emotions that the reader experiences during identification as a result of placing oneself into a character’s situation and viewing “the landscape of [his or her] mind” (*UC* 132) must logically be regarded as emotions proper to the character and not to the reader, since the reader’s body in this context is but the medium that produces theatrical signifiers on behalf of the character. By thinking of readers as actors who are aware of the diegetic wall between themselves and the fictional characters on the page, we can consider identifying readers in the same way McCloud does – that is, as those able to extend themselves “to admit the existence of another being or consciousness, within one’s cognitive purview, without losing oneself in another” (Krasner 258).

To the extent that it is possible to interpret Smith’s examination of sympathy as “designed to address the theatrical character of the way people face each other in the world” (Marshall 169), McCloud’s theory of identification can likewise be understood as being conceived on the conceit of a reader-actor unable to see his own face except through acts of imaginative identification with cartoon characters that he himself animates <sup>5</sup>. Should a comics

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<sup>5</sup> An issue I do not have the means to investigate further in this paper is Smith’s argument that the sufferer is also identifying with his spectators and accordingly modifying his displayed emotions in an attempt to achieve the “entire concord of [their] affections” with his own, the “reflected passion” in either party’s imaginative representation will always be weaker than the original sentiment, keeping both spectators and sufferer safe from the full emotional “violence” of any situation. For a comics reader who is responding to passions in a character that he was responsible for bestowing in the first place, this raises the interesting possibility that a knowing reader might be able to somewhat regulate the degree of his emotional engagement with the cartoon by playing the “fair and impartial spectator” who examines and judges the propriety of his own conduct as the character (94).

reader look at a cartoon and see himself, this is less because he bears any sort of resemblance to the cartoon and more because he has put himself into the character's situation and skin in order to bring it to life. Therefore, assuming identification with a cartoon character to consist of masking oneself in a character in order to "be" (UC 43) the character, the apparent incongruity of seeing one's basic mind-picture in a cartoon can now be explained as a function of the character-mask dramatically signifying one's imaginative re-presentation of the character – that is, the mind-picture of what one would do if placed into the character's situation. At the same time the mask works to visually obscure the body of the one wearing it, it also grants its wearer the ability to stand outside himself or herself, constructing subjectivity as representation such that the reader mediates "between the carnal dimension of existence and the abstract laws of the symbolic order of language" (W&C 3). The character mask, in McCloud's theories at least, becomes a logo that transforms the reader's body into *logos*, granting access to the realm of the symbolic by covering up a reader's personal identity such that he or she becomes a cipher, at liberty to see whatever he or she wants in the cartoon image, including himself or herself. The "'content' of any medium," according to McLuhan, "is always another medium" (8). In the case of comics, at least according to McCloud's identification theory, the content of a cartoon character is always you.

## Chapter 5: Mask-play outside of *UC*: or What Happens when McCloud's Theories Are Put into Practice

Elizabeth Grosz remarks that models of subjectivity cannot be regarded as mere heuristic devices since “historical, social, and cultural exigencies [...] actively produce the body as a determinate type” (x), producing “tangible effects on the bodies studied” (xi). Hence, even though McCloud makes the disclaimer that his interpretation of identification is only a “theory” (*UC* 37), it is imperative to take into consideration how character masking works on the actual dramatic stage with regard to identification in order to see what sort of implications it might hold for the reader-character dynamic in comics.

To begin with, although theatre and comics are distinct mediums, they share a few crucial structural and semiotic similarities. Will Eisner, echoing McLuhan, attests that comics are essentially “a participatory form” where readers “immerse” themselves into the flow of narrative “experience” (*E/M* 88) by imaginatively filling in the gaps in the scant visual information provided. “The only other entertainment form,” he suggests, that gives the same “sense of contact [...] a real, live connection between the viewer and the actor is theatre.” According to Eisner, comics are like theatre in that they are contingent upon “the tacit cooperation of the reader” (*CASA* 41) to be imaginatively involved in the creation and sustainment of the story that is being played out within the panels. For instance, in the same way that objects onstage may be substituted by symbols for as long as the symbol “is able to transfer the object’s own signs to itself” (Elam 7), so are cartoon drawings, no matter how abstract, able to stand in for their real life counterparts. Given that “the only indispensable requirement” for a dramatic signifier is that “it must successfully stand in for its intended signified” (7), a semiotic initiative as basic as an image of a circle, two dots, and a line is quite able to serve as an adequate representation of a real face on the condition that spectators accept it as such. Douglas Wolk emphasizes that while

cartoon art allows “every object’s form [to be] subject to interpretive distortion – even when what’s being distorted isn’t a real image but a distant cousin of something real” (123), the “hard limit” of such distortion is that the image “has to be legible,” since “nothing turns a reader off faster than not being able to tell what she’s looking at” (124). In this sense, a signifying cartoon is comparable to a stage prop, with its dramatic efficacy entirely reliant upon the ability of spectators to relate the sign before them to familiar items or conventions beyond the fictive world. For this ability to work properly, however, it is also necessary that the readers be willing to suspend disbelief in the cartoony appearance of the image and instead let themselves “feel that [they are] watching something real” (*E/M* 88). Indeed, as Kier Elam observes, the “final responsibility for the meaning and coherence” (87) of a stage performance lies with the spectator, no matter how “judicious or aberrant” (86) his or her decodification of the theatrical event. As McCloud himself admits in *UC* when speaking of the meaning-making “dance” (92) between creator and reader in comics: “I can only point the way [towards a certain interpretation]. I can’t take you anywhere you don’t want to go” (93). Unless the comics reader is open to becoming “a willing and conscious collaborator” (65), “respond[ing] to a cartoon as much or more than a realistic image” (30) by accepting at some level the veracity of the alternate reality being presented on the page, a comics story cannot be successfully told for the simple reason that the key semiotic connection required to construct the diegetic wall is being deliberately refused.

Recognition that there is a performance going on, whether consciously or not, in turn leads to the application of what Elam refers to as the “theatrical frame” – the organisational premise that establishes discrete levels of reality by allowing the audience to pick out “which elements belong to the representation and which to the excluded theatrical context” (Elam 79).

“This firm cognitive division,” he notes, “is usually reinforced by symbolic spatial or temporal boundary markers or ‘brackets’ – the stage, the dimming of the lights, the curtain [...] – which allow a more precise definition of what is included in and what is excluded from the frame in space and time” (79). In comics, this boundary marker would be the panel, a controlling device that Eisner describes as conceptually similar to “the proscenium arch and the wings of the stage” in a “closed theatre” (CASA 41) setting. Although primarily used as a “general indicator” (UC 99) by artists to express the passage of time and space in the narrative, the panel also functions as the “frame [...] through which a comic’s action is seen” (CASA 45), directing attention and “surmount[ing] the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander” (40). Comics according to McCloud’s definition, however, must possess multiple panels containing static images, whereas closed theatre usually makes use of a single stage with live actors. A more specific structural analogy for comics, as such, might perhaps be that of serial *tableaux vivants* – ‘living pictures’ sequentially presented on stage by actors who do not speak or move, in which the onus on the spectator to actively cohere and make sense of the scenes is greatly intensified in comparison to conventional theatre going. As with other theatrical models accommodating active and imaginative audience responses, such as medieval drama or variety theatre, comics emphasise the role of the spectator as an intimate psychological participant in the maintenance and ‘truth’ of the story. And assuming identification in comics to involve imaginative acting out, the high degree of viewer involvement enjoyed by comics can thus be attributed to the reader’s “double consciousness” that he or she is responsible for the performance on no fewer than two levels of reality – the inner frame of “playing space” and the outer frame that “embraces both audience and performer” (Gaylord 136).

A third parallel that may be discerned between comics and theatre is that signifying cartoon characters actually do function in a fairly similar manner to signifying masked actors. According to Susan Smith, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw playwrights and directors reacting towards “dominant modes of naturalism and realism” and moving towards a more theatrical stage – one that would not only incorporate folk idioms such as puppet shows into a legitimate “total theatre,” but also employ primitive esoteric devices such as masks in a bid to “appeal to the unconscious mind [and] speak in images” (3). Being “stripped of the absolutes of religious belief” and yet influenced by both modern “philosophies of man’s inherent and necessary duality” and “psychologies of the divided psyche,” playwrights experimented with “antinaturalistic dramatic forms such as symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism,” using the mask as a vital means of “[separating] the presentational stage from the representational stage of realism and naturalism” (4). Once re-established as a stage convention with uses beyond that of mere disguise and false persona, masks were then able to obviate “many of the demands [of] theatrical realism” (Rehm 41) by eliminating the actor’s performing body as an object of audience attention. By removing an actor’s face – the site where identity is socially recognized and constituted – and thus depriving him of a key means of conveying emotion, masks distract audience attention from the actor’s body to instead concentrate it upon the *character’s* body. “Character,” states David Graver, “is the body that Western audiences are trained to look for first and gaze at most intently” (223). And while a character’s body is already ontologically distinct from the actor’s in that “both its interior and exterior are generally open to view,” masking magnifies this condition by exclusively defining the character (and hence the actor hidden underneath) according to the part conferred by the mask. Masking ensures that the audience will understand a character’s identity mainly, if not

wholly, in terms of its exteriority. For although character and actor may be both present on stage at the same time, it is

the character's presence [that] is usually more vivid than the actor's because it is more explicitly defined [...] [Characters] make themselves visible within acknowledged conventions of representation. The kind of clothes they wear, what they tell us about themselves and each other, and their parts in the action all generally add up to create beings with clear purposes and places within the world of a play (221).

Like cartoons that focus upon specific details in order to strip an image down to its fundamental meaning, masks abstract a character into a single fixed image, using overt visual signifiers to denote his or her most essential personality and emotions. And since they deprive the actor of his face, masks also oblige the actor to instead rely on conventionalized or overtly expressive body language in order to communicate the character to the audience, in much the same way that cartoons employ “graphic strategies” (*MC* 94) of simplification, exaggeration, and symbolism to articulate their thoughts and emotions to readers. By imposing “a tight control on one aspect of reality to present it simply” (Styan 169), both stage masks and cartoons are able “to focus our attention on an idea” (*UC* 31), which allows them to amplify and intensify meaning for narrative purposes in a way that realistic art cannot. In this sense, the “concept of character,” as John Styan observes, could be said to derive not from the actor's face but “from the mask” (169).

When recruited as a stage convention signifying inner reality rather than false persona, masks become ideal vehicles of expression for antinaturalistic dramatic forms, “dispens[ing] with the need to ‘act’,” since “two antithetic masks juxtaposed upon one stage [can] provide the substance of a situation and the plan for a play” (Styan 169). Indeed, as Susan Smith points out, masks work extremely well at stylistically depicting “types or forms of humanity” (4) as opposed

to individuals with personal characteristics. This is because as with cartoon art, in which the more cartoony a face the more people it could be said to describe, a mask that has been reduced to essential features similarly enables a spectator to not only “see the actual [character] before him but all the [like characters] who live in his memory” and “every person who bears the merest resemblance to the character” (Meyerhold 131). Again, as with cartoons, this resemblance does not have to be visual or physical in nature, since the abstractness of any mask denotes a role rather than any specific person. And although necessarily reductive in what they can show and convey, masks and cartoons are nevertheless able to facilitate the “simplified expression and dramatization of a difficult concept by focusing it in one clear image” (S. Smith 182), permitting for the analogic transference of complex ideas even as they free the imagination of the spectator to be projected onto their surfaces. For instance, in *Maus*, a crucial effect of the visually basic mouse faces is that “by keeping the faces relatively blank [and] relatively similar to each other,” readers “end up entering into and participating more in bringing this thing to life” (Brown 104) due to the increased exertion of their imaginative faculties. The simplified appearance of the mouse faces, despite its blankness, is first of all inimically suggestive – “you see a lot of expression, but it’s taking place somewhere other than on that piece of paper.” Being mouse-shaped, the faces draw upon the ‘funny animal’ comics convention to provide readers with a privileged “interpretive spot” from which to visually recognize ethnic and national affiliation, but only for the specific purpose of later showing up such outward signifiers as inadequate and politically fraught markers of identity. Simplified in form, the mouse faces moreover actively engage readers in interpretive processes, indicating by their physical presence alone rather than by their historical verisimilitude the dramatic impressions of the various peoples in Vladek’s and Art’s biographies. And like stage masks that direct attention away from banalities such as “the

appropriateness of the actor's age, look, and gender" (Rehm 41), the cartoons also serve as a deflecting device that allows readers to concentrate their attention on the all-important Holocaust story being told rather than on the realism of the drawings being used to depict it. By having spectators "fill out the fixed visage of [a] character caught in radically changing situations," comics reading parallels the convention of masked acting by bringing the "imagination of the audience," "theatre's greatest resource" (41), vitally into play. In this sense, both theatre audiences and comics readers are crucially alike in that they are not only responsible for creating a meaningful narrative out of the respective images they see, but when faced with literally or metaphorically masked characters, for imaginatively placing themselves into the situations of those characters in order to figure out what those characters are feeling.

Given how similar the process of reading masked characters for expression and interiority is to identification, it is unsurprising to find in theatre criticism some support for the notion that character masking could give rise to a higher tendency to identify with that character. Susan Smith, for example, finds that since masking releases characters from the particularity of a realistic depiction while allowing dramatists to address "broader subjects" (4) more likely to resonate with the audience, masking could in theory be plausibly recruited towards eliciting greater levels of audience identification due to its simplification of characters into easily recognizable types. She points out: "[though] the development of naturalistic drama comes from freeing the actor from the mask [...] the costs of naturalism are the loss of abstraction and *the possibility of audience identification*" (4, my emphasis). In other words, if increasingly realist theatre forestalls the probability of audience identification, then increasingly dramatic theatre ought to increase that probability. The application of masks to the dramatic stage, given the antinaturalistic qualities of the mask, would therefore presumably further advance a play's

available opportunities for identification. Eugene O’Neill too voices a similar opinion in his *Memoranda on Masks*, arguing that masks would “liberate [*Hamlet*] from its present confining status as exclusively a ‘star vehicle’” by allowing the audience

to identify [itself] with the figure of Hamlet as a symbolic projection of a fate that is in each of us, instead of merely watching a star giving us his version of a great acting role.

We would even be able to hear the sublime poetry as the innate expression of the spirit of the drama itself, instead of listening to it as realistic recitation – or ranting by familiar actors (187).

By negating the presence of what Graver terms the “personage body” (Graver 226) on top of the actor’s performing body, O’Neill claims masking to be able to promote identification since a mask is “more subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor’s face can ever be” (“*Memoranda*” 186) and would therefore offer the audience a chance for unprecedented levels of imaginative interpretive participation. Instead of looking at an unmasked character and seeing an actor, the audience would be able to look at a masked character and imaginatively project anyone’s visage under the mask, including their own. O’Neill’s reasoning here runs quite closely with that of McCloud’s, where the open meaning of the abstracted static image allows for greater imaginative participation from its spectators, hence promoting identification with the image. “Participation,” as McCloud states, “is a powerful force in any medium” (*UC* 69) and one that comics are already adept at harnessing due to the low levels of visual information contained within the panels and the space between the panels that necessitate imaginative filling in. By applying a mask metaphor to explicate his theory of identification, McCloud manages to draw upon the esoteric and symbolic theatrical mask as a reader engagement mechanism that amplifies the apparent power of the cartoon to “to command viewer involvement and identification” by

making its willing readers very much “a part of the story” (*MC* 204). The reader’s volition in these processes is especially key, since “A voluntarily assumed mask,” declares Susan Smith, “afford[s] the masker a measure of privacy and self-protection [whereas] an imposed mask strips the wearer of his true identity and dignity” (150). In speaking of the “silent dance of the seen and unseen” (*UC* 92) that takes place between readers and comics creator, McCloud underscores the integral role of the reader in the active discourse of codes required for any comics production to be successfully interpreted. [Fig. 11] And in encouraging his readers to apply a mask metaphor to that dance, he becomes able to highlight both the psychological and ontological safeness of the comics medium despite the contentious mechanism of mimetic reenactment that he believes lies at the heart of identification and the comics reading process.

However, regarding the comics panel as a kind of dramatic stage in which the identifying reader is intimately involved as both actor and initiator of theatrical communication, even if only in the imagination, raises issues that McCloud does not resolve in *UC* or in any of its sequels. In the introduction of this essay, I brought up the question of whether a reader who has identified with Rorschach as the latter murders a man would be able to emerge unscathed once he closes the comic book and ends the imaginative play. Although McCloud’s mask metaphor states that a reader would have absolutely no problems in leaving behind the fictional world, his writing elsewhere in *UC* seems to suggest otherwise. When explaining how else participation works in comics, McCloud classifies the mental process of making semiotic connections within panels as an example of what he calls ‘closure.’ Closure, he

Fig. 11 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of a single panel showing McCloud’s avatar addressing the audience. The caption reads: “This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 11: *Understanding Comics* 92 (© Scott McCloud)

describes, is the phenomenon of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (UC 63), “mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (64), such that we are able to recognise and transform a circle, two dots, and a line into the “reality” of a face. While closure in a hot electronic medium like film is “continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible” since the spectator does not have to exert much effort to fill in the details of the image, “closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary” (68). To prove this point, McCloud draws two sequential panels: one showing a man attacking another with an axe, the other showing a scream ringing out over a cityscape, the implication being that a murder has just taken place even though the act itself is not depicted on the page. In consonance with McCloud’s logic, a reader would be participating in the creation of this event in at least two ways: firstly, by perceiving and interpreting the cartoon images in order to deduce that violence, probably fatal, has just occurred; and secondly, by identifying with the men depicted in the panel, both aggressor and victim. These actions, McCloud argues, though committed from outside the panel and only in the mind, are nonetheless sufficient to implicate the reader as a “silent accomplice” and “an equal partner in crime” (68). He illustrates:

Fig. 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two panels. The first showed the two smaller panels depicting ‘closure’ – i.e. a man being attacked by another with an axe. The second showed McCloud’s avatar addressing the reader. The captions of the two smaller panels read: “Now you die!!”/ “No! No!”/ “Eeyah!” The captions of the main panels read: “I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style./ All of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot” (68). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 12: *Understanding Comics* 68 (© Scott McCloud)

“Closure in comics,” McCloud proudly declares, “fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word” (69), in which “Creator and reader are partners in the invisible, creating something out of nothing, time and time again” (205). By extension, this means that despite McCloud’s assurances about the safeness of the masking effect and readers never mistaking cartoon images for their real life counterparts, his own logic dictates that a reader who identifies with Rorschach as the latter strangles a man cannot possibly be said to be innocent of the crime. To use his own words, “to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (69) – the reader, despite only playing at being Rorschach, would no less guilty than Rorschach himself. For unlike cinema or the theatre, whereby the “central understanding” is that the audience is a “privileged onlooker” with “neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage” (Goffman 125), comics by McCloud’s own reckoning leaves its spectator with no other available part besides that of the willing and conscious collaborator. In identifying with cartoon characters and vicariously acting out their parts, comics readers become deeply incorporated in the creative process of the narrative in a way that regular theatre audiences are not due to comics readers inhabiting not one but both sides of the theatrical frame. Indeed, Richard Schechner states that though the reality of any performance is in the performing such that “a spectator need not intervene in the theatre to prevent murder as he might feel compelled to in ordinary life,” this “doesn’t make it ‘less real’ but ‘different’ real” (122, my emphasis). And for the comics reader who straddles both sides of the theatrical frame due to him or her acting out a re-presentation of a cartoon character, erecting a third diegetic wall that clearly separates the reader-actor from the character being played by deeming the latter to be only a fiction and hence inconsequential raises far too many questions about the exact distinction between reality and artifice in an imaginative performance context.

Nor does the assumption of a mask necessarily make this ontological distinction any clearer, since in practice, the mask, especially in modern drama, is frequently used for purposes of *preventing* rather than promoting audience identification. For instance, in Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the kindly protagonist Shen Teh adorns a mask depicting a devious and calculating male alter ego to symbolise the moral self-estrangement she undergoes upon giving up prostitution to enter the cutthroat world of commerce. Similarly, in *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, Jean Genet satirises and deconstructs racial stereotypes by having black actors parody historical white stereotypes whilst wearing white caricature masks, emphasizing both "the spiritual death of those who deny their common humanity" and "the fact that to distinguish between races is to play artificial roles" (S. Smith 36). Even O'Neill, in reflecting upon the technical flaws of his own productions, laments that his application of masks in *The Great God Brown* detracted from "the abstract theme of the play" by "stressing the more superficial meaning that people wear masks before other people and are mistaken by them for their masks" ("Second Thoughts" 188). Themes of misrecognition and social role-playing are likewise reflected in *Maus II*, most notably in the opening section of the chapter "Auschwitz (Time Flies)," in which Spiegelman reveals that the artistic style he has been applying elsewhere in *Maus* – with cats, pigs, frogs, and mice respectively signifying Germans, Poles, French, and Jews – is in itself an elaborate form of metaphorical masking.

[Fig. 13] Drawing all the characters in the section as humans wearing animal masks instead of as anthropomorphic animals, he not only destabilises

the normativity of the "closed 'food chain' system" created by the juxtaposition of (Jewish) mice

Fig. 13 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of a single panel showing Spiegelman in a mouse mask, surrounded by journalists in other animal masks. Original source: Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. Print.

Fig. 13: *Maus II* 42 (© Art Spiegelman)

and (German) cats, but also complicates the power hierarchy it suggests by underscoring the artificiality and inauthenticity of masking as a means of performing identity, ethnic or otherwise (Kannenberg 83). The masks, once revealed as such, do not grant their wearers freedom by disguising them, nor do they allow the readers of *Maus* to freely imagine themselves under the visage, since what already lies underneath the animal mask is another person, isolated from other characters by a mask he or she is unable to relinquish. Instead, the masks only highlight “the awful paradox of the human condition,” whereby one is permanently “trapped in the public mask” and “fixed [...] to play a designated part on a narrow stage” (S. Smith 176) not of one’s choice. Masks, as O’Neill admits, for all their participatory potential, are far more likely to highlight to a contemporary audience the sociological assumption that “men have ideas or images of themselves that they protect from or present to the world” (156), reminding them that “social definition is a matter of playing a part” (164) and that to be defined by one’s masks suggests both impotence and negation.

Rather than opening up room for imaginative play, the stage mask instead functions as a barrier that “creat[es] an aesthetic distance between the character and spectator” (S. Smith 183) by isolating and dehumanising its wearer under a false face. As mentioned earlier in this section, an advantage of the mask is that by transforming the human face into an icon, it focuses the meaning of a text into a single image, “mak[ing] a character or idea immediately accessible” (181). This expediency is, however, not without its inherent disadvantages. In *Watchmen*, for example, the various superhero masks are deliberately crafted to be material and symbolic representations of the ideologies or ideas that their wearers see themselves embodying. While Rorschach’s shifting inkblot mask epitomises his nihilistic moral absolutism and Hooded Justice’s executioner’s cowl expresses his relentless and violent outlook on crime, the second

Nite Owl's more light-hearted and adventurous approach towards vigilantism has him donning a tufted brown hood and goggle combination made to loosely resemble an owl's head. Although these masks differ in terms of their abstraction and complexity, their chief purpose remains the same in that they are all meant to iconically communicate the wearer's superhero identity and ideals to all who behold them. Such easy public access to the text of the superhero body as exteriorised in the mask, however, comes with the condition of that mask being able to express only a very limited range of information, since "the mask is a simple device [that] cannot bear the burden of complicated or conflicting meanings" (182), presenting only a single exaggerated emotion or state of being upon its unresponsive visage. Appropriate as Rorschach's mask might be as an emblem of his personal philosophies, it is nevertheless impersonal in that it tells its viewers almost nothing else about Rorschach: his dreadful childhood, his motivations for becoming a vigilante, and his sadistic tendencies. Similarly, while the full-faced wrestler mask worn by the Comedian might be interpreted to be showing disgust or grimness, the static quality of the mask – its eyes neutral and the mouth frozen in a straight line – prevents all other emotional states from being discerned and read. Although a mask might appeal to common denominators of human experience in order to signify meaning, by advertising its artificiality at the same time that it permits its wearer to depict only a type or form of humanity as opposed to a realistic being, what the mask tends to emphasise to its audience is its fictionality rather than its realism, its otherness rather than its likeness. Hence, if the physical "aspects that distinguish the object [i.e. the mask] from ourselves and the real world" outweigh the imaginative "qualities that [might] make the object seem like ourselves," this would logically result in the mask being "push[ed] away from us" (Ben Chaim 67), making it harder for us to identify with it.

This condition of alterity is further exacerbated by the fact that for as long as a wearer remains masked, he is confined to the role or persona it imposes on him, to the extent that to act out of character while masked would be to lose much of the efficacy the mask holds as a dramatic device. When an incensed Nite Owl threatens to “break the neck” of a member of the street gang responsible for murdering his mentor and to “take out [the] entire rat-hole neighbourhood” if necessary, Rorschach reminds him that to do behave thus while masked for the sake of personal revenge “in front of civilians” (M&G X.16) would be to undermine the authority accorded to his public identity as a superhero. Later on, when Rorschach is caught between being killed by Doctor Manhattan and falling in with Veidt’s plan to save the world, he tearfully unmask to reveal Kovacs’ face before going to his death – realising that there is no possible way for him to live on as Rorschach without compromising the integrity of the ideals represented in his mask. The mask in a performance context, by and of itself, does not permit its wearer to engage in behaviours beyond what its visage prescribes. Instead, as with the shamanistic and religious masks that the theatrical mask derives from, the wearer must abandon for the duration of the masking his private “human identity” in order to become “a spirit, force, or god” (S. Smith 82), allowing himself to be taken over by the spirit of the ‘other’ as symbolised by the mask. Rather than accurately depicting people, the mask, as Susan Smith suggests, “works best [on stage] when it is at odds with the human face and form,” reducing its wearer to the clarity of an essential characteristic at the same time that it depersonalises and distorts him into “something greater, lesser, or other than mere humanity” (182). She states that for a mask to be successfully deployed, it should be used in “acceptable context[s]” such as either the stylised dramatic modes of Brecht’s epic theatre and Yeats’ Noh plays; naturalistic plays “in which the presence of the mask has a rationale;” or when used to personify abstractions, such as in

hallucination sequences or morality plays. Should a mask attempt to depict realistic persons rather than obviously fictional characters or entities, the result would be mimetic failure due to the inability of the mask to be anything more than a “one-dimensional, simple substitut[e] for the face” (127). Yet since the mask *is* a one-dimensional substitute for the face, its usage also “distances and protects the audience from [any] human suffering [taking place] on the stage” (165), either by rendering its wearer as alien and hence unsympathetic, or by taking from the actor his primary means of expressing and conveying emotion. By physically separating the character from the spectator and furthermore pointing to its own artificial and inhuman construction, the mask makes it extremely difficult for the spectator to perceive the emotions and thoughts of that character. This difficulty in turn suggests that a mask would therefore be more apt to deny “the spectator a sympathetic or emotional response” (183) for the simple reason that there is rather less information available for the spectator to recruit towards purposes of imaginative re-presentation. And insofar as Daphna Ben Chaim is correct in finding that the aesthetic tension between “awareness of fictionality” and “recognisable human characteristics” determines “the minimum requirement for identification” (67), an increasingly abstract mask, at least in the theatre, is likely to result in *decreasing* chances for identification due to the mask possessing a combination of a high perception of unreality and low humanisation.

For McCloud to thus claim a masked model of identification while insisting that “anyone, young or old [would] respond to a cartoon as much or more than a realistic image” (UC 30) not only complicates the traditional divisions between theatricality and reality that he brings up in defence of comics, but moreover throws into question the political efficacy of describing identification as the process of imaginatively masking oneself in the persona of an other. For while masks are primarily recruited for purposes of concealment and disguise, they are also quite

capable of transforming their wearers, even to the extent of obliterating private identity in favour of the masked identity. Rorschach is an especially pertinent case in point – Kovacs could be said to have identified so completely with the vigilante persona of Rorschach that he gives up his private identity as Kovacs in order to adopt the image signified by the inkblot mask as his true face. The problem with such absolute metonymic substitution, however, is that when a masker “allows himself to be defined solely by externals, then the masking is no longer social playing but an act of becoming” (S. Smith 165), of internalising the public identity conferred by the mask. In “Auschwitz (Time Flies),” none of the humans ever attempt to remove their animal masks, despite Spiegelman making it quite clear that these masks are held on with nothing more than thin strings. Here, the animal masks invoke the Jungian theory of the persona, the social face that is worn as “a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual”<sup>6</sup> (“Two Essays” 192). Though Jung believes the development of a flexible persona to be a vital part of functioning in the social world, he is nevertheless careful to warn against the “danger” (“Memories” 416) of identifying with a specific persona – becoming “identical” with it due to having adopted it as a fixed ego-ideal. According to Jung, to identify with one’s mask is to become wholly persona, leaving the maskers in an unreflective state of mind where they are “utterly unconscious of any distinction between themselves and the world in which they live” (Dawson 267). For instance, to have the readers or any of the masked human characters in *Maus* identifying with the animal masks and imaginatively positing themselves as animals whose species corresponds with their ethnic or national affiliation, would be to risk reinstating in a more mundane aspect the “blanket generalisations about ethnicity” (Kannenberg 88) found in Nazi propaganda. Masks, by requiring

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<sup>6</sup> The psychological concept of the persona derives from the Latin *persōna* and the Greek *prosōpon*, both referring to the mask worn to denote a character in a theatrical performance.

an understanding of identity solely in terms of exteriority and intensity, “fail to encompass the human condition” (88) in that as a means of signification, they only work to discover interiority in hollow images and not actual people, who cannot be understood in terms of sight alone. Furthermore, unlike cartoons, increasing abstraction in masks does *not* correlate with universal representation, since the mask only ever symbolically represents one type of human being rather than all or most. Masking may free its wearer by disguising him or her under the anonymity of a mask, but it also brings about identity transformation by reductively fixing the personality of its wearer and visually dehumanising him or her. To identify with a masked character without acknowledging this constraint would be to enact in part what Jung refers to as the “pathos” that denies true individuation while checking “all effective self criticism” (“Two Essays” 170), leaving readers with “little or no concept of themselves as beings distinct from what society expects of them” (Dawson 267). If the humans never think to remove their animal masks, it is possibly because they have already accepted masking as a fact of the human condition and a social necessity, in which the public mask has become the permanent face.

Just as any extension of the self into a medium means “to accept [it] into our personal system” (McLuhan 50) and be “perpetually modified by it” (51), so does the imaginary extension of the self into a mask during identification involve taking on in some measure its premises about exteriorised identity and the dress as self-construction, such that we too must wear the mask as our true face. Insofar as McCloud is correct in regarding identification in comics as the process of masking oneself in a character’s body, to identify in comics is to then also exacerbate the epistemological limitations inherent in every act of identification. Identification as a process always carries with it the possibility of vitiating the integrity of the other body by supposing one’s re-presentations to be sufficiently representative of the one being identified with, causing

the other's identity to be unquestioningly subsumed into one's own. And while the imaginative assimilation of a fictional cartoon character would seem harmless enough in McCloud's estimations, considering his beliefs that that "all readers want to transported by fiction" (RC 125) and "a little escape seems a reasonable request, and one of the many that comics can fulfil," the problem is that not all cartoon characters are created to resemble masks that are artificial, one-dimensional, and meant for mimetic wearing. Indeed, as Sedgwick points out, although assimilation is constitutive of identity politics in that "to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification with" (*Epistemology* 61), to identify *with* someone is indubitably not the same thing as to identify *as* someone, since it is extremely difficult (if at all possible) to know exactly what it is like to be someone else, especially if they are "very differently situated" (62) from yourself. In other words, even if identification requires imaginative re-presentations of the self when placed in the other's situation, to take one's impressions for the actual perspective of the other is to "take for granted the disinterestedness and beneficence of the process by which a viewer 'sympathis[es]' with the sufferings of a person viewed" (151).

For a spectator to misrepresent the quality or locus of her or his implicit participation in a scene – to misrepresent, for example, desire as pity, *Schadenfreude* as sympathy, envy as disapproval – would be to enact defining instances of the worst meaning of the epithet ["sentimental"]; the defining instance, increasingly, of the epithet itself. The prurient; the morbid; the wishful; the snobbish; the knowing; the arch: these denote subcategories of the sentimental, to the extent that each involves a covert reason for, or extent or direction of, identification through a spectatorial route (151).

Sedgwick's writing indicates that to mask oneself in a character in order to mimetically become that character, especially when one voluntarily enters that character's world "on [the]

condition of an invisibility that promises cognitive exemption and eventual privilege” (97), is to risk aggrandising one’s personal politics and desires onto the body of the character, eventually leading to mental assimilation of the body-mask. By extension, this means that even if we ignore the functional and ontological problems of putting McCloud’s theories into practice and assume him to be correct in dubbing the masking effect as a means of “safely” (*UC* 43) entering the comics world without loss of self, his description of masked identification nevertheless fails to account for the politics involved in imaginative acting out. As Kaja Silverman argues, although identification is “a process whereby the other is interiorised as the self” in order to create and fortify the body ego, unless “we identify excorporatively rather than incorporatively” (23), we risk reducing the “ideal image” of the other into “a tyrannising essence” (2). For example, to have a reader of *Maus* identify with Vladek without keeping in mind that Vladek is only “one person with one memory” would be to lend “a delusory authenticity” and heroism to Vladek’s survival story by recognising him as a “winner” (Brown 96) whose actions are to be emulated, when the reality of the Holocaust was that “it wasn’t the BEST people who survived, nor the best ones [who would] die” (*Maus II* 45). Moreover, in order to identify with Vladek, the reader would also have to imaginatively play the part of Vladek before himself, in which to regard any part of the re-presentation as convincing or authentic would be to attenuate the severity of the traumas and horrors of the Holocaust that were experienced by actual survivors like Vladek. Hence, according to Spiegelman, what is far more important for his readers than identification with his characters is for them to “try to understand the situation” (Brown 96) of the Holocaust and that what it was like to be there is “terrible knowledge that we cannot know” (97). When identifying with characters in narratives based on real life events, respect for the alterity of bodies and lives not our own is of paramount importance if we are to avoid what Brecht

describes as the “simple empathy with the characters in a play” (174) that allows spectators “to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences),” giving up all attempts to understand the world and to hence enact political action. And although the majority of characters encountered during comics reading are likely to be fictive in origin and nature, insofar as every re-presentation of a character is a sort of identification, the theatrical rite, as Johan Huizinga contends, must then be regarded as “methetic” rather than merely “mimetic,” with all its effects “not so much *shown figuratively* as *actually reproduced* in the action” (15). In situations of intense identification, therefore, “where the theatre is more real than reality, where the mask is more real than the face” (S. Smith 153) and where spectators “feel more real when they assume roles or masks than they do when they are themselves,” there is no guarantee that the external symbol of the character-mask will not be espoused by the reader to the extent of replacing his face and hence his private identity. McCloud’s consideration of identification as an automatic and integral part of the comics reading process is thus problematic in that it repudiates the medium’s potential for telling stories that might grant readers the ability to see beings other than oneself as more than just images to be narcissistically appropriated. To “arrogat[e] to ourselves what does not belong to us” (3), as Silverman attests, is to deprive it of “all rights in its conscious existence and character” (23), ultimately refusing an ethical relationship with the other and any possibility of an authentic understanding of ourselves.

McCloud’s theories, in attempting to circumvent the issues surrounding the relationship between self and other that are inherent in any discussion of identification by applying the mask as a structuring term, raise new issues of their own. By transferring the ontological weight of self onto the mask and “playing the game of clothing, [in which] the garment itself substitutes for the person” (Barthes 220), McCloud is able to downplay the cultural reputation of comics by

rhetorically separating readers from the characters they identify with. After all, as George Santayana points out, “masks are fun in themselves, and when you are fundamentally sane it is pleasant to play the madman and to yield to the eloquence of an imagined life” (129). In moreover openly acknowledging the isolation and alienation that all readers experience under their own social masks, McCloud also naturalises the process of masked identification in comics by construing it as both part of our daily interactions with others and as a part of the untapped “hidden power” (*UC* 3) in comics – that is, “the power of understanding” (198) the “inner truths” (196) found in the minds of other people. Yet regarding the character-mask as a mere extension of the body is hardly the most ideal solution to downplaying comics as a psychologically seductive medium, since according to the Derridean analysis of the logic of supplementarity, “[any] supplement operates simultaneously as an optional appendix and as a completing and hence necessary element” (*W&C* xv). Given that “interpretation does not merely explicate or categorise the image” but “actively makes it” (*W&C* xx), considering identification as a type of character-masking in turn brings all the “complementary dynamics of concealment and revelation” (128) intensified in the theatrical device of the mask to bear upon an already contentious psychological mechanism. In a world where masking is the ontological state of being, any “sense of security and superiority” that a mask metaphor provides its wearer is “as much an illusion [...] as the stage action” (S. Smith 165) in that it becomes just one more image that the wearer embraces for purposes of self-definition. The notion of identification in comics as imaginative character masking, although useful in that it provides an attractive way of looking at reader-character interactions while distancing the medium from its ignominious past, continues to complicate the fraught relationship between reality and artifice in comics.

## Chapter 6: Concluding Speculations: What else I Would Like to Have Considered in This Paper but Did Not, Mostly for Reasons of Space

There are a few points concerning McCloud's theories that I have not had the opportunity to explore further in this paper and I would like to briefly touch upon them as a means of concluding. The first is that I so far have followed the precedent set by McCloud in *UC* by dealing specifically with full-face masks that obscure all or most of the human face, when there are in fact a wide variety of masks found in both comics and the theatre that do not follow this expedient. [Fig. 14] The most commonly utilised mask in *Watchmen*, for instance, is the domino mask – an unembellished version of the Venetian carnival mask that covers only the eyes and the

Fig. 14 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two panels on two different pages, both showing McCloud's avatar holding up masks. The first showed a full-face mould mask, the second showed a neutral simplified face drawn on a plate and stick. The captions read: "A mask" (34)/ "That's the theory, anyway" (37). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 14: *Understanding Comics* 34, 37 (© Scott McCloud)

space between them. While often employed as a means of concealing private identity in the superhero genre or in masquerades, the domino mask, however, is practically speaking a very poor disguise because it covers so little of the face, keeping its wearer easily recognisable. This suggests that although full-face masks, as I have shown earlier, are likely to decrease the possibility of identification with the wearer, it remains entirely possible that with other types of masks that reveal more of the human face, such as the domino mask, the chances for increased identification remain. In this case, a reader's ability to identify with characters such as the Comedian would be determined by whether the latter is wearing his full-faced wrestler mask or his domino mask, since the former would render him more alien whereas the latter would allow him to be seen as more palpably human. There are moreover other physical factors that might also contribute towards a mask promoting or preventing viewer identification, such as

space between them. While often employed as a means of concealing private identity in the superhero genre or in masquerades, the domino mask, however, is practically speaking a very poor disguise because it covers so little of the face, keeping its wearer easily recognisable. This suggests that although full-face masks, as I have shown earlier, are likely to decrease the possibility of identification with the wearer, it remains entirely possible that with

its constituent materials and exactly which part of the face it covers, since “written clothing invariably transfers the nature of the substance onto the piece” (Barthes 124) by synecdoche. Even though both Rorschach and the Comedian wear full-face masks, the fact that one mask is made from the remains of a latex summer dress while the other is made of leather dyed blue to match the colours of the American flag gives the masks two very different connotative meanings – the most obvious being that of fetishism versus patriotism. A domino mask that covers the eyes would likewise differ from a surgical mask that covers the nose and mouth in affecting the ability of the wearer to clearly convey and express emotions. When clothing is used as a “deputy or surrogate for the body,” its attributes and the sensations they evoke “[do] not simply affect the overall ensemble of garments worn together at any one time but the body itself” (W&C 64). The final meaning of a mask, or indeed, any item of clothing, cannot be separated from the various effects and messages being relayed through its “technical composition” (64). As such, I find McCloud’s emphasis on visual abstraction as the determining factor for identification and his focus on full-face masks severely limiting, in that he fails to take into account the full potential of signifying masks as a means of framing and constructing the boundaries of the human body.

Keeping in mind the notion of an object’s technical composition, a second observation I would like to make is that if we apply more strictly McLuhan’s dictum that ‘the content of any medium is always another medium’ (8) to McCloud’s theories, then the actual content of a cartoon character in a comic book would always be ink and paper. To this extent, the content of a cartoon character on a page cannot be properly said to be the reader in the same way that the content of a masked character on stage could be said to be the actor. In this paper, I have hitherto been interrogating the soundness of McCloud’s thinking on the basis of his mask metaphor falling apart in a real world context. While McCloud is probably off the mark when it comes to

explaining why cartoons allow comics to command as much viewer participation as they do, what this observation raises for me the interesting question of whether his explanation of identification would work if exclusively confined to an ink and paper context. That is, if his theory was practiced solely within the boundaries of a comics world in which the basic nature of everything as only ink and paper would tacitly obviate the key issues of fundamental being that arise upon imaginative identification with others. Although I do not have the means to enquire further in this particular direction, an affirmative answer to that question would at least partly explain why McCloud's assertions have survived for as long as they have in critical discourse about comics: because *UC* itself is presented in comics format, complete with a cartoon avatar of McCloud who claims to be "setting the record straight" (*UC* 2) on the medium. This avatar, as he helpfully informs us, is furthermore deliberately drawn in "a simple style" (36) that we are meant to identify with and mask ourselves in, in order that we might more "fully receive the message" (37) he has to deliver. [Fig. 15] Therefore, whether or not we are actually identifying with the avatar, by illustrating his theory for us in the very world that he is taking us on a "journey" through, McCloud is able to convincingly explicate his ideas to their best effect by using both his own unique terms (e.g. an avatar who literally inhabits the book as a speaking 'mask' on behalf of McCloud) and the internal logic of a comics world created entirely by himself.

Fig. 15 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consisted of two consecutive panels showing two versions of McCloud's avatar addressing the reader. The first showed the cartoony avatar being used throughout the book, the second showed a more realistically drawn avatar. The captions read: "That's why I decided to draw myself in such a simple style./ Would you have listened to me if I looked like this?" (36). Original source: McCloud Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print.

Fig. 15: *Understanding Comics* 36 (© Scott McCloud)

A third point is that given how much of McCloud's theories rely on concepts of private identities, visually iconic characters, and disguising masks that grant their wearers the power to act, it would almost seem as though he was drawing inspiration from the themes and tropes of the superhero genre. While there is insufficient evidence in *UC* to prove this to be the case, in its sequel *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud does state in a chapter about genre diversity in comics that "Superheroes are first and foremost about role-playing – *becoming* the character," and that he has previously discussed in *UC* by way of the masking effect why "comics has a great untapped potential for audience participation" (*RC* 118, my emphasis). However, he then goes on to argue that to assume as such "that the superhero genre and comics were made for each other" (118) is disingenuous. According to McCloud, this is firstly because as genre diversity in Japanese and European comics markets has proven, there is nothing "intrinsic" in comics that "restricts it to such power fantasies;" and secondly, because "in the arena of first-person power fantasies in which superheroes belong, a new technology [e.g. video games, film] already kicks comic's butt", "capturing the imaginations of far more kids" than comics ever could.

Though I agree with McCloud that comics are quite capable of handling a wide variety of genres and that to yoke comics and superheroes together on the basis of market demand in North America is as absurd as it is limiting, I do find his subsequent claim that there is nothing intrinsic in comics that restricts it to first-person power fantasies rather weakened by the psychoanalytic and mimetic groundwork he lays out in *UC*. The whole point of the masking effect, as he himself points out in his rebuttal to Frome, is that when "done right," it gives comics "the power to transmit at least some of the immersive thrill reserved for [...] media" ("First Impressions" 103) such as cinema and virtual reality. This suggests to me that for as long as McCloud insists upon stressing identification and the masking effect as the primary means by which we as relate to

cartoon characters and read our comics, his mission to redefine comics remains that much more difficult – due to the similarities in procedure and outcome that exist between identification in comics (as he describes it) and the indulgent power fantasies associated with other popular media that he wishes to distinguish comics from. His use of the mask metaphor in *UC* has its merits, but given the long-standing association between superheroes and masks, not to mention the problematics mentioned elsewhere in this paper that masked identification brings up on the prescriptive level, I am still not convinced that it is necessary to use the mask metaphor in order to explain how identification works in comics. For instance, McLuhan manages to make the same argument that McCloud does about how cartoons grant readers access to a sensually stimulating world, but without bringing in the concept of masking. McLuhan writes that low definition iconographic art “uses the eye as we use our hand in seeking to create an inclusive image, made up of many moment, phases and aspects of the person or thing,” in contrast to “representational art” that visually isolates and separates “a single phase or moment or aspect [...] from the multitude of known and felt phases, moments and aspects of the person or object” (365). In this sense, iconographic images, such as cartoons, are “not visual representation, nor the specialisation of visual stress as defined by a single viewing position” (365). Instead, they require the viewer to use a “tactual mode” of perception that is “total, synaesthetic, involving all the senses” (365). Thus, the difference between McLuhan and McCloud’s explanations is that unlike McCloud, who assumes that identification occurs automatically upon *viewing* the cartoon, McLuhan’s deference to non-visual modes of perception allows him to more easily account for why we might respond to cartoons as much or more than a realistic image – not because we are identifying with the cartoon, but because quite simply, cartoons require more imaginative work in order to be understood, engaging all the senses instead of just one. If identification in comics

does indeed fundamentally differ from identification in other media (and I am not sure that it does) due to the former's use of cartoons, then any account of it, masked or not, ought to be able to at least properly address the psychological and/or psychoanalytic premises behind identification, while also avoiding digression into elaborate structuring terms that detract more from the explanation than add to it.

Having begun this paper with a close reading of Rorschach and his mask, it is probably appropriate that I end this paper with another. What first motivates Kovacs to construct his mask and take on the persona of Rorschach is the Kitty Genovese incident. When he reads in the newspapers about how “Almost forty neighbours heard screams” and “Nobody did anything [...] Some of them even watch[ing]” from above, Kovacs is horrified and “Ashamed for humanity,” deeply struck by the knowledge of “what people were [...] behind all the evasions, all the self-deception” (M&G VI.10). Somehow convinced that the original customer for the rejected latex dress he has been cutting up must have been Kitty Genovese herself, he takes the remains of the dress and makes himself a mask, marking his entry into the superhero fraternity. The especial virtue of the inkblot mask, in this case, is that it gives Kovacs an inhuman face that he can “bear to look at in the mirror” (VI.10), since it mortifies him to think that he should be human, just like the forty neighbours who let one of their own die. Despite the nihilistic connotations that the mask later takes on as Rorschach grows increasingly cynical and disillusioned with fighting crime, here, identification with the mask is what initially empowers Kovacs, giving him the courage and hope to do what he can to change the world. More significantly, by macabre extension, if one regards the latex dress as a symbolic synecdoche for its wearer, then Kovacs could be said to be identifying with Kitty as well – wearing her as a second skin in much the same way that a shaman might wear a death mask that represents “the power and life-force of [a]

deceased person,” re-enacting primeval events in ceremonies meant to “remind the living of their responsibilities” (Lommel 218). Identification with the other, in this case, is precisely what opens Kovacs’ eyes to the world around him, forcing him to reflect on the social factors behind Kitty’s murder before spurring him into corrective vigilante action. Even though he appropriates the dead woman’s body-dress as an ego-ideal that will let him to look into a mirror and deliberately (mis)recognise the masked man he sees there as himself, Kovacs is at the same time determined to squarely face “the world’s black underbelly” as a matter of ethical integrity – to “never turn his back” or “pretend it doesn’t exist,” “No matter who orders him to look the other way” (M&G VI.15). Contrary to the position of critics like Brecht, identification and the resultant empathy it precipitates generates an especially forceful political response from Kovacs, implying that identification does hold a cognitive capacity that allows for “greater awareness of others,” working “in conjunction with reason to evoke social action” (Krasner 262).

Yet the one important thing about identification, if Rorschach’s example is anything to go by, remains that one must never eradicate “the boundaries between myself and the other, between my own experience and hers” (Krasner 263). The difference between Rorschach and Kovacs, as Rorschach confesses to his prison psychoanalyst, is that “Being Rorschach takes a certain kind of insight” (M&G VI.14), whereas “All Kovacs ever was [was a] man in a costume” (15). The incident that transforms Kovacs into Rorschach involves Kovacs deciding to rescue a kidnapped girl for “personal reasons” (VI.18) – overidentifying with her as a “little child, abused [and] frightened” on the basis of his own abusive upbringing. Upon discovering that the kidnapper has already butchered the girl and fed her to his dogs, Kovacs at once abandons his non-killing tenets, mercilessly slaying both the dogs and the kidnapper in an extended scene that strongly intimates his rage to be driven by years of pent-up aggression directed against his own

mother. It is at this moment that Kovacs is “muffled under latex” (VI.21) and Rorschach is born – Kovacs having drawn so thoroughly upon his traumatic childhood experiences to reconstruct the girl’s own that he quite fails to distinguish between the two, such that the perverse sexual gratification he feels upon knowing the kidnapper is dead has much more to do with his own emotional catharsis than with having exacted vengeance for the girl. Rorschach, while retaining Kovacs’ will to acknowledge and combat society’s evils, has little of the latter’s idealism. Instead, he ruthlessly kills all criminals he encounters in the belief that Armageddon is inevitable, identifying with the puritanical nihilism he now sees in his re-interpreted mask and fancying himself to be a superior moral authority beyond empathy, whose prerogative it will be to refuse to save the people when the gutters “full of blood [...] scab over” (I.1) and drown “all the vermin”. Behind the fixity of the mask, Kovacs’ face and personality withers, and when the time comes for Rorschach to move beyond his destructive ethos to give peace a chance, Rorschach finds himself trapped by the persona of the mask, unable to muster any of Kovacs’ tactical wit or compassion to bargain his way out or to understand the intent behind Veidt’s actions. For Rorschach, the mask taken up for his survival in the world that Kovacs inhabits turns out to be worn and identified with at the cost of empathic feeling, along with the caveat that to renounce the new face it provides means certain death, one way or another.

In screaming at the police to return his face-mask to him, Rorschach forgets what he instinctively knew as masked Kovacs – that the injunction of giving anyone back their face has to do with protecting their personhood, granting them dignity by both respecting their alterity and identifying with them as fellow humans, rather than with simply handing them yet another mask to hide behind. Any masked model of identification then, such as the one that McCloud articulates, would need to not simply look at the rhetorical and epistemological advantages of

imaginatively masking oneself in both real and fictional others, but also consider vital questions of how and why people mask. For masks, as Susan Smith points out, “can attest to the concrete reality of imaginative creations and to the absolute nature of art in a world troubled by constant change” (125). And in using one as a link between the imagistic world of the spectator’s imagination and the corporeal world of reality, we necessarily incorporate it into our psychic economy at the same time we irrevocably attach ourselves to the mask as we interpret it, working out in the process “our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation” (Holland 124).

“Every mask leaves an impression on the person who wears it. And any mask may eventually become more of a reality than we ever imagined...” (Morris 265).

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