Identifying with Superman: Addressing Superman's Career Through Burkean Identification

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IDENTIFYING WITH SUPERMAN: ADDRESSING SUPERMAN’S CAREER THROUGH
BURKEAN IDENTIFICATION

By

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of Superman to offer commentary on the changing nature of Burkean identification across distinct historical periods. Beginning with the creation of Superman in 1938, I explore Superman’s Golden, Marvel, and Contemporary Age revisions addressing his construction of ethos as a means to establish grounds for identification.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING SUPERMAN

“The really great super-heroes, like Batman, and Spiderman, have lasted so long because they can be reinterpreted for each generation” (Gough, 4.06.2001). What Al Gough, co-creator of TV’s Superman revisioning, *Smallville*, is really suggesting is that these superheroes are always identifiable to audiences. Whether Gough intends it or not, identification here is used in the Burkean sense. This audience identification is important because as comic scholar Scott McCloud acknowledges, “Storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement…is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story’s characters” (42) and that a character only works if the “the audience is willing to participate with the character” (59). In other words, for a character to be “successful” it must promote identification; however, for identification to happen, the character must resonate with the community at a particular moment in time. For comic book superheroes with “careers” that span generations, this can be especially challenging because the tools for identification “change with the times and across cultures” (Baumlin & Baumlin, xxii); superheroes must be able to adapt to the cultural zeitgeist in order to promote identification. Despite a seventy year career in the superhero business, Superman has at times struggled to find ground for identification with his audience, like Al Gough hints at above.

This concept of identification is what Kenneth Burke defines as “A is not identical with his colleague B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B” (1325). Burke is suggesting that one person is by their very nature, different from another, but can be joined with another if their interests are joined. For our purposes, a superhero like Superman is different from his audience but when their interests intersect, Superman can be identified with his audience. Superman is an alien creature with superpowers, but even in his guise as Clark Kent, is different from his peers, in the same way that “A” is different from “B.” Burke calls this difference between one and another the ambiguity of substance while in this thesis we will use

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1 It is important to note the differences between identification, identity and identify. Burkean identification is very different from a reader's (or viewer's/listener's) ability to identify, or recognize, a character, in much the same way that connotative definitions are different from denotative ones. People can recognize Superman during each of his revisions through some combination of his actions, appearance, mannerisms and ideology. Burkean identification only happens, however, when Superman's interests are aligned with the same cultural values of his audience. This identification can be as simple as Superman’s decision to become a vegetarian in *Superman, Birthright* connecting him with community members who view that shared interest as the grounds for identification. Oftentimes, however, identification happens at a deeper, ideological level, when members may recognize (and thus identify) Superman by his red and blue costume, but only form identification when they understand that those colors stand for an American Way that they also believe in and connect over.
nuance to refer to that same idea. Burke is suggesting that if there were no differences, there would be no need to persuade. Identification would be automatic. Ultimately, this means there are no absolutes in Burkean identification. Both Superman and his audience (or A and B) will have distinctive qualities. As we look at Superman and his audience, if Superman and his audience have joined interests, they are identified with one another, despite their differences. Some audience members may share the same feelings of isolation and abandonment from their parents that Superman experiences as an alien on Earth; in this shared interest there are grounds for identification between Superman and his audience. This joining of interests that Burke alludes to is significantly an allying of two or more individuals over common causes that still admits to ambiguities, or nuance, between community members. A may very much disagree with B’s choice of dress, music, and taste in entertainment, but may still find grounds for identification by allying him or herself with B over shared philosophical beliefs. It is this understanding that explains even something like the U.S. allying itself with the Soviet Union during WWII despite such deep-seated economic and political differences. Their belief that the Axis powers were a mutual enemy provided grounds for identification that was enough to overcome their differences at that point in time.

Given Burke’s discussion of the nature of identification, it is remarkably telling that although Gough works on a Superman revision, he would recognize other superheroes as more successful in establishing the grounds for identification. Gough admits that largely due to the difficulty Superman has had in keeping up with shifting political, historical, and cultural changes over the last fifty years, he has not consistently retained the tools he uses to establish identification.

In this study I will look at Superman’s grounds for identification during three distinct time periods to articulate how and why identification occurs during some time periods and not others:

1). the initial introduction of Superman during comics’ “Golden Age” (1938-1957) where Superman promotes identification;

2). the “Marvel Age” highlighted by community differentiation (1958-1992) in which Superman does not promote identification;
3). and Superman’s “Contemporary Period” (1993-present) where Superman has shown the ability to revise\(^2\) himself in ways that lead towards identification, but not universally across his revisions.

At the start of his “Golden Age” when Superman was first introduced in 1938, his mantra “Truth, Justice, and The American Way” served to ally him with the cultural values of Americans for much of the next twenty years. This initial construction of Superman promoted strong identification because his audience was seeking the objective and positivistic assurances of such a mantra. Superman enters the scene after nearly a decade of the Great Depression closely followed by the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the threat of Nazi Germany during WWII, and then immersion into the Cold War; his audience wanted reassurance in their traditional values and virtues (Ashby). Superman’s mantra and altruism laid the groundwork for identification with this audience.

Superman was the archetypal character for all other superheroes during this Golden Age; however, beginning in 1958, Marvel Comics began writing superheroes whose heroic struggle was marred by emotional turmoil and psychological journeys. These Marvel heroes replaced Superman as the standard for superheroes. This “Marvel Age” of comics marked the start of a more complex and fragmented American culture with which Superman struggled to form common grounds for identification. Superman’s positivist and absolutist presentations, which were at one time demanded by a largely homogenous community of comic readers who would themselves resonate with that type of altruism, became too absolute for a differentiated community with opportunities to experience their surroundings through cable television, video games, and the emergence of Rock and Roll music. This historical context is captured by Bradford Wright, who argues, “Superman projected a consensus of optimism and confidence in American progress…championing this worldview even as social and political issues like the Vietnam war, Civil Rights, poverty, political corruption and the ‘generation gap’ eroded that consensus” (227). Superman presented unity when his audience was increasingly divided. Superman’s singular Truth did not work with a community whose “truth” had been blurred during the Vietnam War. It was also Vietnam which renegotiated patriotic duty as a politician’s

\(^2\) I purposely allow Superman, a fictional character, to exert agency throughout this thesis. It is in no way meant to diminish the efforts and contributions made by the many authors, artists, directors and editors with Superman revisions, only an admission that a discussion of this nature is more accessible when approached from the idea that Superman the character is the one constant in his universe and that the many contributors will change frequently.
whim, a media fabrication (Wright). Superman’s continued belief in “The American Way” to mean resolute and objective altruism was at odds with this new reality and began to erode his grounds for identification. While many other comic characters were quick to demonstrate nuance that led to identification with the audience during this time period, Superman was ultimately unable to make this transition. In fact, in 1992, Superman was “killed” in the comic, at least for a few issues, which figuratively represented his inability in his traditional presentation to connect with audiences and the need to reinvent him for a more contemporary audience.

Since his death in 1992, the “Contemporary” Superman has been revised in an attempt to better establish grounds for identification with the audience in the hopes of ensuring that his character succeeds. While the contemporary Superman has not proved universally successful in promoting identification with his audience, the revisions of his character acknowledge the need for new ways to lead towards identification with his audience in response to the changing cultural and social climate. In these more successful Contemporary revisions, Superman acknowledges his emotions for the first time and wrestles with moral issues so as to illustrate a move towards nuance. This is an important move on Superman’s part to attract audience participation. During this contemporary period, superheroes are increasingly the muses for texts in all media. If Superman wants to maintain (or recapture) his iconic status, he must establish the grounds for identification with his audience, which he will only do if he can demonstrate the emotional nuance and moral ambiguity demanded by today’s audiences.

The Superman Mythos

Superman’s potential to lay the grounds for identification is made more difficult because he is occasionally revised and frequently remediated. Remediation is a concept J. David Bolter defines as “the representing of one medium and its cultural values and content in another medium” (3), which differs from his understanding of revisioning, the process of reimagining Superman’s (or any character’s) storyline and essential values. Because each medium has its own culture that influences the way texts are perceived (Kress, Rogoff), Superman must establish grounds for identification across media with the understanding that the tools he uses to do so may differ from one medium to the next. This helps explain why the contemporary Superman may be more successfully remediated in TV than in film; the audiences in each medium demand slightly different methods for establishing identification, and he may be more successful in one medium than the other. Superman has been remediated across almost every imaginable media
form over the last sixty years from comics to television to film and now to the digital, as shown in Table 1:

**TABLE 1: Superman’s Remediations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Comics</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Broadway</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Internet</th>
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Table 1 illustrates a range of Superman’s remediations, which highlights the demand across media for his story and indicates on some levels the success of his revisions at various times. He has maintained a consistent comic book presence, while the end of his remediation in radio can simply be read as an audience move from radio to television. The large media gap between the late 1950s and the late 1970s on into the 1980s illustrates Superman’s failure to establish grounds for identification during the Marvel Age; there was little demand for him to be remediated.

**Comics:** Superman first appeared in comic book form, initially with *Action Comics* #1 (June, 1938) and later with his own headlining title, *Superman* (1939-current). Some major milestones in the comic medium include Lex Luthor’s first appearance in April 1940’s *Action Comics* 23 and a major revisionist attempt in a 1986 mini-series (small group of individual issues following a common plot, similar to a novella) *The Man of Steel*, which saw Superman strengthen his American patriotism and moral values to align himself more closely with the
Reagan Presidency while toning down some of his superpowers. During 1992 Superman battled the villain Doomsday, whose pure rage and desire for destruction was said to be the mirror image of Superman’s selfless altruism and moral fiber, ultimately leading to Superman’s death at the close of the year. Revived in 1993, Superman’s comic book appearances continue today, with Superman and Action Comics bylines appearing monthly. These monthly issues are complemented by a series of crossovers (appearances in other superhero lines), graphic novels and special issues. Mark Waid’s 2004 Superman, Birthright is one of the most prominent graphic novels since his “Death” story arc; other revisions within the comic medium, such as Superman, Red Son and Superman, Secret Identity, explore alternative versions of the Superman mythology.

Table 1 also shows some of Superman’s representations outside the comic book medium, which I will focus on in this thesis:


**Film:** Superman was the first superhero to be featured in a major film release, 1978’s Superman, the Movie. This release was quickly followed by three sequels, Superman II (1980), Superman III (1983) and Superman IV (1987). Superman Returns (2006) a fifth film, establishes its chronology following the events of Superman II.

**Internet:** Although DC Comics has run a website with Superman information since the mid-1990s, much of Superman’s online remediations have been fan based, and are unaffiliated with the publisher. The popular internet fansite Kryptonsite.com, the first webpage devoted to Smallville, first came online in February of 2001 and has provided a channel for communities to interact with Superman ever since.

**Other:** These major remediations do not account for the countless Superman crossover comic book appearances, computer and video games, lunchboxes, t-shirts, and action figures that spread throughout the world. It could be argued quite fairly that computer and video games have more audience appeal today than Waid’s Superman, Birthright; however, Birthright will comment back and influence the entire Superman universe, whereas the games just won’t do that. These games are based off of the Superman storyline established in texts like Birthright, but as yet have not added to the storyline in the way that Superman’s comic or TV roles have
established so much of his mythos. These secondary media—the games, plays, and novels—each tell a story that involves Superman constructing the grounds for identification, but their overall impact on comic culture is less significant than the mediums I will examine because they will not (or at least to this point have not) influence the overarching Superman storyline in the same way that his comic, TV and film appearances have.

As often as Superman has been remediated, how Superman is revised says more about identification across historical time periods. For this reason, I will include the manner in which Superman is remediated during each historical period to illustrate the ways he was reaching his audience and the relative demand for Superman content, but not delve into the specific cultural qualities of each medium as that discussion would take this thesis into a worthy yet different direction than intended. The focus here will be on the nature of Superman revisions and the overarching historical contexts which bring those about. In the Contemporary period, this historical context includes the technological advance into the Digital Age, but as this and all other potential remediations are available not just to Superman but all other superheroes, the key question will be how Superman will make use of these new tools rather than the influence each medium has on Superman.

Geoff Klock sees superhero revision as a complicated undertaking, underscoring the need for Superman to gravitate towards nuance. Klock translates Harold Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” to the comic book world in arguing that revising superheroes like Superman means “reesteeming or reaiming so as to aim correctly…for superheroes this means finding anxiety in the entirety of the character’s past narrative” (29). This means that Superman must account for his sixty year career while also “reaiming” or revising himself as he seeks to create identification with each successive historical audience. For Superman to promote identification with increasing diverse audiences with shifting cultural values, his audiences must understand his origins and how those origins influenced his grounds for identification as Superman is revised.

The main storyline that is tweaked or added to starts with Superman being born on the doomed planet Krypton as Kal-El to parents Jor-El and Lara; Superman is one of a race of highly advanced peoples, physically and intellectually. As Krypton is destroyed (the method of destruction differs in certain revisions), Jor-El places a baby Superman in a spaceship and sends him off to Earth, a planet with similar life structures. Superman’s shuttle safely reaches Earth and is discovered by an elderly (the age changes with revisions) Kansas farmer, Jonathan Kent,
and his wife Martha, who for years has longed for a child. The Kent’s adopt the boy and name him Clark, deciding immediately to keep Clark’s origin a secret. Early on, the Kent’s emphasize the difference between right and wrong, introducing Clark into a didactic world of absolute Truth, where he is raised to know the importance of morals.

As Clark grows he exhibits extraordinary abilities. Drawing power from the Earth’s yellow sun, he possesses super strength, super hearing, and X-Ray vision. He can run faster than the speed of sound, shoot lasers from his eyes, fly, and is virtually invulnerable. While these powers enable him engage in his heroic deeds, they are not why he is heroic. Superman must ensure that his audiences understand his heroism stems from a desire to see “truth, justice, and the American Way” meted out, not simply because he has superior powers. As part of his identity, though, Superman can use these powers to establish or erode his grounds for identification, and each revision works to connect Superman’s powers to the cultural climate of the historical period. During the Golden Age, they are explained through science, a rationale that is unsuccessfully continued through the Marvel Age. In the Contemporary period, emotion plays a significant role in how Superman experiences his powers.

Reaching adulthood, Clark travels to the city of Metropolis (similar in size/stature to New York). Clark adopts two identities in Metropolis: “Mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent” (Clark wears glasses and is bumbling and clumsy, masking his true abilities) of the Daily Planet, and Superman, a friend of the downtrodden and amazing crime-fighting superhero. At the Daily Planet, Clark falls for ace reporter Lois Lane, who in turn ignores Clark while falling for Superman, who is more amused than affected by these developments. During initial constructions of Superman, these two personas are very much separate entities, each exhibiting completely different behavior and responses than the other; contemporary versions, especially Gough’s Smallville, blur the identities of the two so that Superman is afforded the luxury of a stronger sense of humanity.

Although he fights crime and an assortment of super-villains in Metropolis, Superman’s greatest (and recurring) nemesis is Lex Luther, the world’s smartest man/mad scientist/evil business man. Luthor’s occupation and background also change depending upon the revision and remediation, each version carefully designed to lend more credibility to his identity and Superman’s by extension. Early remediations feature Luthor as a scientist because the community saw value in objective facts and empirical data. Contemporary versions see him as a
corrupt businessman. From his very first appearance, Luthor is established as Superman’s foil, unfathomably self-motivated with no remorse for his actions, a sharp contrast with Superman’s impossible and unwavering altruism. This mythos provides Superman’s foundation; it is the base storyline from which the others must build upon or acknowledge if they were to go in another direction. It serves to establish his alien, outsider persona that highlights his isolation. His powers lend strength to the individual power narrative during the Golden Age and later allow him to explore his moral ambiguity. Lex Luthor is immediately seen as an enemy, but when contemporary revisions establish a friendship between a young Lex and a young Clark, it adds to the nuanced understanding of Superman’s identity. How revisions tweak this mythos goes a long way towards determining if Superman lays the groundwork for identification.

Because Superman is wholly owned by the publisher DC Comics, his storylines tend to remain relatively consistent between media, with any new storyline adoptions for one media (he started out “leaping tall buildings” and only began flying during the radio broadcasts, later adopted across media) generally incorporating into Superman’s other media forms. Thus, regardless of the remediation, the Superman mythos establishes the baseline story from which he will move forward. With one exception, any revisions to this storyline that take place within remediations only become standard when they are assimilated into the comic storyline (Superman is a comic book superhero after all). This lone exception is Al Gough’s television series Smallville, (2001-present), which rewrote much of the Superman mythology, becoming its own standard. This is important because many of these changes were adopted in Mark Waid’s 2004 Superman, Birthright comic book and continue to influence the Superman universe, including the online universe. Using non-comic book media to influence his mythos will ultimately offer Superman more diverse ways to engage his audience and form grounds for identification because it will allow him to target the interests of each media specific culture.

Burkean Identification

In arguing that “you persuade a man by identifying your ways as his” (qtd. in Alcorn 3), Burke links identification to the rhetorical art of persuasion. To establish grounds for identification, a character must persuade the audience that his ways are like theirs. Because every Jane Doe is different from the next Jane Doe, Burke can then argue that “here are the ambiguities of substance…A is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another, in this case B” (1325). Here Burke is again illustrating that one person is unique from
the next, but at the same time joined in identification with another if their interests are allied. In our case, Superman is distinctly different than any of his individual audience members, but will be simultaneously joined with them if the grounds for identification are present. This concept is vitally important; it assumes that nuance is an inherent part of identification and thus moves away from an absolutely universal position, which would suggest that Jane Doe A is the same as Jane Doe to the nth power, making identification automatic because the identities of the individuals are exact. One differs from another because their substances are not the same. They are not identical and although they may form identifications, they do not hold universally absolute positions. Burke even suggests that “if men were not apart from one another there would be no need for attempted persuasion” (1326). This concession means that audiences may be, to quote Burke, “at odds” with a character, but form identifications with them nonetheless, similar to the manner in which the U.S. originally supported the Taliban during the 1980s because the existence of a common enemy (the Soviets) laid the grounds for identification.

From here, it is quite easy to see audiences exhibit distinct differences from Superman and yet identify with him nonetheless. During the Golden Age, Superman’s altruistic quest for a positive “Truth, Justice, and The American Way” gave audiences something from which to build identification because much of this audience shared those same values. As the Golden Age gave way to the Marvel Age, it is equally as realistic to understand how audiences would have difficulty identifying with a positivist “Truth, Justice, and American Way,” which did little to acknowledge the community’s nuance Burke sees as inherent to identification.

As the grounds for identification change over time, Superman’s approach to “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” throughout his revisions also changes in order to keep pace with the interests of his audience. The qualities of Superman that help audiences identify him and identify with him are the sum qualities that make up Superman's identity. Burke defines identity as the property (or tools) with which a character surrounds himself: “Man’s moral growth is organized through properties, properties in goods, in services, in position or status, in citizenship and reputation” (1327). Here Burke is suggesting that a character’s identity includes those “properties” which make that character recognizable to others: a character’s possessions and cultural and social roles, audience perception of the character, the character’s physical appearance, etc. It is this property then, the identity of a character, which can lead to identification. Audiences will accept Superman when his identity or any of his other tools,
provides the grounds for identification. Burke’s suggestion that these properties are related to ethics (man’s moral growth) will ultimately influence Superman’s approach to identification during each historical period.

**Ethos as a tool for Identification**

Because Burke sees identification as enhancing the rhetorics of persuasion, it can be argued that ethos is a tool (or property) with which a character may promote identification. This relationship is acknowledged in Roger Cherry’s definition of ethos: “The assessment of the characteristics of the audience and constructing discourse in such a way as to portray oneself as embodying those characteristics” (255). To construct a credible ethos, then, a character must understand the audience interests and use discourse to illustrate that they themselves hold a similar position. Applying Cherry to Superman, Superman must assess the interests of his audience, (similarly, he must understand their properties) this implies that Superman understand his audience as nuanced; they are not identical to him. Then, he must act and present himself to that audience as having the same interests or properties. While this does not mean audiences have to identify with Superman, it means they do have to recognize him as having similar properties as they. Only then will Superman’s ethos be credible and lead to identification. Cherry’s definition mirrors Burke’s discussion of identification that suggests audiences will identify with Superman if their interests are joined. Working with Cherry’s understanding of ethos, Superman is able to lay the grounds for identification if the audience will accept his ethos. For the audience to accept his ethos, Superman must show that his properties are allied with the properties of that audience.

Like identification, ethos “changes over time and across cultures” (Baumlin & Baumlin, xxii), so that while Cherry’s definition of ethos is the one we will use for this thesis, it is important to note that ethos has been, and continues to be constructed in different ways. The choice of Cherry for this text is strengthened because he has synthesized a history of these constructions into his definition, which while contemporary, acknowledges the fluid relationship between character and audience (265) that will allow his definition to translate across time periods. This is important because even though Golden Age ethos was largely connected to the ethics of the character, Cherry’s definition still allows ethos to be used as a tool for building identification; if a character understands that ethics is an important interest of the audience and constructs discourse to portray that understanding, their ethos will be strengthened, as will the
grounds for identification. As today’s understandings of ethos grow more complex, Cherry’s basic understanding of ethos as the interplay between character and audience interests through discourse allows room for these new understandings to support his. These differing constructions of ethos speak to how characters form identification within each time period and illustrate how if Superman cannot adapt his ethos to the interests of the audience, there will be times when he does promote identification and times when he does not.

During Superman’s introductory period (1938-57), his audience was largely homogenous (Wright 227) and demanded an ethos that centered on objective and didactic positions. The demand for objectivity was coupled with a strong desire for ethical purity. Theresa Enos argues that Golden Age ethos was “largely tied to good character” (95), an argument that Jakob Wisse and others support. Even Burke, who wrote during this “Golden Age,” related properties to ethics with his “Man’s moral growth is achieved through his properties” (1327) in arguing for an ethical definition of identity. Although Enos and Wisse may not be commenting on Cherry’s definition of ethos, his definition is broad enough so that used as a base it is capable of incorporating the discussions of Enos and Wisse to support itself. Cherry sees ethos as a construction of discourse to reflect the values of the audience; incorporating Enos’s arguments to this makes a Golden Age ethos center on ethical discourse as the tool for aligning a character with the audience’s values.

The commentaries of Burke and Enos suggest that constructing ethos during this Golden Age meant presenting oneself as ethical. This framework for ethos coincided with America’s belief in inherently identifiable binary constructs (Brooker). Ethically, there was good and bad with little grey area in between and characters were either one or the other. Because Superman did good and was objective and didactic while doing so, he was able to construct and present a strong ethos which in turn becomes his grounds for identification. He assessed the characteristics of the audience, saw that they demanded altruistic heroes, and constructed his ethos in such a way as to highlight that objective altruism. He was, as Bradford Wright argues, “Unwaveringly objective and impossibly altruistic…there was nothing ambiguous about the hero’s character, cause or inevitable triumph …always in control, rarely impulsive and never irrational” (184). This construction of ethos strengthened his identification.

Superman encountered an increasingly complex and disassociated community beginning with the “Marvel Age” that continues on into the Contemporary period. This is a problem for
Superman because a change in audience by nature changes the grounds for identification and Superman’s audience interests were moving towards the complex and emotional. Superman routinely failed to assess this move and continued to project his objective and positivistic values, which earlier provided the grounds for identification but increasingly were not. As Superman’s community began to understand America as more complex, they wanted heroes to reflect this complexity. Wright argues that those superheroes with whom audiences formed identification at this time understood this: “Characters must still perform unbelievable physical acts of heroism, but evince believable human traits and emotions…it has become about exploring the character’s psychological motivations and cultural implications” (267). The larger-than-life heroes were out in favor of heroes who fought crime and their own psychological issues.

Peter Brooker sees this period as the end to fixed, grand narratives and to opposing binaries. These were the very properties Superman had based his Golden Age ethos off of, his “Truth, Justice, and American Way.” Superman’s failure to acknowledge these audience interests and persistence with his “American Way” would weaken his ethos during the Marvel Age and erode his grounds for identification. Adding to the increasingly complex interests of this new audience, Keith Miller argues that this cultural transition is largely marked by the audience’s desire to seek out their own answers in texts (59). Audiences wanted to explore problems on their own, rather than having an answer handed to them. Beginning in the Marvel Age, audiences were now opposing Superman’s objective and didactic ethos in favor of heroes who offered more nuanced (i.e. complex) properties. Superman must retain his heroic identity but needs to adopt a more fluid and nuanced construction of ethos to move towards identification with that heroic identity.

The arguments of Brooker and Miller have significant implications for Superman in the Contemporary Age. Ethos is no longer weighted so heavily towards ethics and good character as it was during the Golden Age. This idea is captured by Enos, who suggests that “increasingly, there are more tools with which to create a credible ethos” (95). The main tool in constructing ethos during the Golden Age was presenting a strong moral character. Beginning in the Marvel Age and increasingly so, ethos is constructed in more complex ways, with more tools at the disposal of the character. Again, Enos is not specifically commenting on Cherry’s understanding of ethos, but their ideas overlap, leaving us with a Marvel Age ethos that continues to remain the
construction of discourse to align a character’s values with the audience’s, only now there are more tools at the disposal of the character.

Constructing ethos with more than just good moral character should allow Superman to move beyond relying on his good character and towards an exploration of his moral and emotional nuance to help establish grounds for identification. It allows Superman to expand his ethos beyond his ethics while maintaining his ethical identity as a tool towards establishing identification.

Johanna Schmertz offers a discussion of contemporary ethos as a series of “essences… the stopping points at which the subject (re)negotiates their essence to call upon whatever agency that essence enables” (86). Schmertz is highlighting the demand for Burkean ambiguity within a character; one of the character’s tools in constructing ethos during the Contemporary must be the flexibility to respond contextually. Although Schmertz is not offering commentary on Cherry, it mirrors the idea that ethos is a construction of discourse based on an understanding of the audience’s values. For Schmertz, one must be ambiguous enough to negotiate their “essence” at various moments. This discussion goes beyond the ethics and moral character ethos and highlights the need for Superman to demonstrate more nuance than his Golden and Marvel age fixed ethos initially allowed. Superman cannot rely purely on his good character because it is based on absolute positions, a consideration Burkean identification denies. Thus, Superman must renegotiate his properties when faced with a new audience to highlight those properties that align with the audience’s interests. This renegotiation would allow Superman to explore all the “tools” at his disposal, or within his identity, creating nuance and fluidity. In one contemporary revision, the comic Superman, Birthright, this means Superman becomes a vegetarian, a move that gives Superman humanity rarely present in his Golden and Marvel Age iterations and allows audiences to form identification because his ethos shows a fluidity to adapt to some of their interests.

Superman’s insistence on objective and didactic constructions of ethos during the Marvel Age prevented identification. If his contemporary character is to be successful, he must continue to demonstrate a more nuanced and fluid construction of ethos which allows community members to search for their own answers. Only then will he promote identification. As Superman’s career unfolds, I will answer the following questions: How does each historical
period frame the grounds for identification? And, can Superman maintain his identity and still revise his ethos to lay a ground for identification in each time period?

**Methods**

Offering a historical analysis of Superman’s construction of ethos as the basis or grounds for identification, I will draw examples from the comic book, film, and television media because they have the broadest public appeal and reach and/or have the most impact on Superman’s mythos. The specific texts I will refer to in this these are laid out across Superman’s seventy year career in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Text Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Superman’s 1st Appearance (Action Comics #1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Superman Origin (Superman Comics #61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Superman The Movie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>The Death of Superman (Comic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Superman Returns (Film)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Smallville “Pilot”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Smallville “Reckoning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Superman, Birthright (Comic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Superman Origin (Superman Comics #61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the textual choices are significant as either the first appearance of Superman, first within a certain medium, or serve as a text that explains or adds to his overarching mythos. There is a significant twenty-five to thirty year gap present between *Superman #61* and *Superman the Movie* during which Superman maintained his Golden Age identity and construction of ethos. At this time, Superman functioned as something of a grandfather in the superhero universe, still the patriarch of the family but removed from the decision-making processes, which in this case was the superhero audience. Texts from this time period do not offer the rich plotlines and character
development that those chosen texts do. The selection of *Smallville* acknowledges the success the show has had translating to a contemporary audience, and Kryptonsite.com serves to illustrate the groundwork the *Smallville* Superman has laid for identification.

Within each chapter I will 1) discuss the historical factors influencing the time period, 2) illustrate how Superman is revised and remediated during each period, 3) explore Superman’s construction of ethos, and finally, 4) explore how these machinations affect Superman’s ability to establish the grounds for identification.

In Chapter Two I will explore the introduction of Superman and roughly the first twenty years of his career, his Golden Age, illustrating how his “Truth, Justice, and The American Way” captured the public’s spirit like no other superhero before. Choosing my examples from Superman’s comic book appearances, specifically *Action Comics #1*, the first appearance of Superman, and one of his earliest origin stories 1949s *Superman #61*, I will illustrate how Superman’s initial iteration successfully promotes identification because in constructing his ethos he has aligned himself with the characteristics of the audience.

In the third chapter I explore Superman’s attempts to maintain “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” in the face of a diversifying community whose homogeneity crumbled amidst the Vietnam War, the movement for Civil Rights and gender equality, and a series of other authorities and cultural norms (Klock, Wright). Beginning in 1958 when artist Jack Kirby and writer Stan Lee joined forces at Marvel Comics (DC’s rival publisher), the “Marvel Age” saw comics reinvent or create anew, heroes who spoke to a fractured audience with diverse wants and needs. The audience no longer had room for the “larger-than-life heroes who didn’t share their values and way of relating to the world. Instead, the Marvel Age audience wanted heroes to be ‘just like them’” (Waid). Superman’s inability to acknowledge this cultural shift prevented identification, ultimately leading to DC’s move to write “The Death of Superman” storyarc in 1992, which can be read as an admission that Superman no longer connected with his audience from 1958-1992. I will analyze both the “Death” story arc and the first Superman film, Richard Donner’s 1978 *Superman The Movie*, to illustrate Superman’s failure of identification.

In chapter four, I will examine Superman’s contemporary revisionist efforts in the comic book (Mark Waid’s *Superman, Birthright*), television (*Smallville*) and film (Bryan Singer’s 2006 *Superman Returns*) media in arguing that post-“death,” revisions of Superman have at least attempted to construct a character more allied with the audience’s interests, with some revisions...
proving more successful than others in promoting identification. It is during this contemporary period that Superman begins crafting a nuanced, fluid character that encourages identification from the audience. I will also argue through these examples that in these contemporary versions, emotional appeals are increasingly a means by which Superman may craft his ethos. Using emotion to strengthen the credibility of his ethos will allow Superman an additional tool with which to establish the grounds for identification.

In my conclusion, I would like to reach an understanding of how Superman promotes identification with his audience across distinct historical periods, focusing on how Superman illustrates salient characteristics of identification through ethos in the contemporary time period, including the use of emotional appeals and the need for audience assessment and participation.
CHAPTER 2
SUPERMAN’S GOLDEN AGE

Superman has enjoyed a seventy year career as an American icon, but with varying degrees of critical and commercial success. A major reason he has lasted so long, but also not always so well, is that he has not consistently established the grounds for identification with his audience members. Because the grounds for identification change between historical periods, a historical study of Superman’s career will illustrate what tools he could use to establish those grounds and how he went about using them. Beginning with an exploration of the Golden Age of comics (also, not coincidentally, Superman’s Golden Age) will establish the foundation for Superman’s construction of ethos and its grounds for identification as he moves forward through his career.

Superhero comics were first introduced into American culture at the start of World War II. In America this time was marked by a strong belief in the rights of the individual, a masculinity defined by rational thought and objective discourse, and the belief in binary constructions—someone or thing can ultimately be defined as good or evil, right or wrong, their position absolute (Ashby, Crothers, Klock, Wright). The importance of the individual to American culture—Lane Crothers highlights this individuality as “notably American over the group think” (95)—meant that audiences would have strong grounds for identifications with individual heroes who fought the inherent evil of groups like the German Nazis and later during the Cold War, Communists from the Soviet Union in a culture that readily accepted the construction of binary opposites.

Historian Leroy Ashby captures the spirit of the time into which Superman was birthed: “[C]rucial to this post-Great Depression/WWII culture was the public hunger for heroes who supplied evidence that in the rapidly modernizing world, traditional values and virtues still counted” (177). Initially, the sports world provided the bulk of these American icons. Ernest Lawrence Thayer’s fictional Mighty Casey came to life in the form of a Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, or the ultimate All-American Ted Williams and represented “peace loving, reluctant warriors” (Ashby 265) who championed one’s civic duty to promote democracy and individual freedoms (Crothers). Soon, audiences would have a new icon to revere outside the sports world: The Man of Steel.
Superman co-creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster introduced Superman to the world in 1938 as a celebration of the common man in response to the Great Depression. Although the Depression ended a few years before his introduction, Superman was first conceived in 1934 and early Superman stories emphasize pursuit of social justice to the detriment of almost any other concern. Early stories feature Superman teaching the greedy corporate bosses the evil of their ways. When a CEO schemes to steal more money from his investors, Superman creates a fantasy town and populates it with actors to show this CEO and his cronies how their actions have led to an unending recession. Superman’s enemies were the corporate suits who perpetuated social inequality, a response to the Depression era social climate.

Very quickly, argues Wright, Superman stories “affirmed the young, alienated, and dispossessed ‘Clark Kents’ of society in their desire to commit to an inclusive national culture” (11). These “Clark Kents” believed in the strength and power of the individual but wanted to see that individual fit into a homogenous American culture connecting one individual to the next through shared values and firm moral grounds. In this “inclusive national culture,” America was a place for freedom and opportunity, achievable through hard work and loyalty. This celebration of common man quickly morphed into fights against the evils of the Axis powers and later, the Soviet Union. While the evil he fights may change over time, Superman remained constant.

Superman led the comic charge in becoming part of the patriotic war engine. Although comic books encountered periods of recession and government censorship during this Golden Age (Ashby, Wright), Superman’s ability to steadily assess his audience interests and then construct his ethos around these audience values helped him remain largely immune to these factors. Well into the 1950s his commercial appeal and sales remained strong because he continued to present a strong foundation for identification.

It was largely due to Superman that during this time, the comic industry experienced its “Golden Age,” a period marked by strong public interest, successful remediations, and abundant sales. Superheroes like Wonder Woman and Captain America were quick to follow in Superman’s footsteps, defending the American public in the face of a dichotomous evil and showing strong moral convictions in their ideology. The audience wanted these larger-than-life heroes to represent their own patriotic ideals. Of these heroes, Bradford Wright writes, “There was nothing ambiguous about the hero’s character, cause or inevitable triumph …always in control, rarely impulsive and never irrational” (184). Their actions fit the cultural zeitgeist.
Superman and his peers championed the community desire to be morally strong, objective, and rational. Audiences found identification with these superheroes easy.

**Revising and Remediating Superman in the Golden Age**

During this initial twenty-year introduction, Superman was regularly remediated, a term Bolter uses to describe the movement of content and culture from one medium to another. After his initial introduction in comic books, Superman was syndicated as a radio program from 1940-1951 (*The Adventures of Superman*). Many of these remediations meant revisions for Superman. Because of the constraints of radio broadcasting, it was much easier for Superman to fly than “leap tall buildings in a single bound.” This new power soon became the standard and was adopted in many of his other remediations. When syndicated radio began to lose popularity to television, DC Comics successfully placed Superman on primetime in *Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958). The show’s plotlines mirrored those of Superman’s early comic book storylines years, initially featuring storylines centered on tracking down criminals and helping the oppressed and later relying on less edgy, more patriotic faire. This showed Superman’s move from Depression era hero to part of America’s war engine, a move that aligned his values with those of his audience.

While Superman’s identity was tweaked in his radio and television remediations, the greatest revisions occurring during this time period happened in his original comic book medium and were then carried over into his other media storylines. Introduced in 1938 Superman was intensely masculine and gruff. In one exchange during *Action Comics #1* Superman binds and gags a prisoner as he flies her to the governor’s mansion. Once there he drops her on the ground and instructs her, “Make yourself comfortable! I haven’t the time for it” (Siegel 3)! In his actions, Superman shows little restraint. Later scenes from the issue feature Superman storming into the governor’s mansion in the middle of the night, breaking doors in the process, and eventually, when he catches up to some criminals trying to drive away, he shakes them out of the car from mid-air and then smashes the car to bits. Wright notes of this early Superman, “He was a tough, cynical wise guy similar to the hard-boiled detectives like Sam Spade who also became popular during the Depression years…Superman took to crime-fighting with an adolescent glee and would mock his adversaries as he thrashed them” (9). In scenes such as these, Superman is
playing the stern, hard hero popular in detective reads like *The Maltese Falcon* and those written by Raymond Chandler at the time, tying his ethos to the cultural interests of his audience\(^3\).

Within a short time (as early as two years after his introduction), Superman was revised to emphasize his commitment to civic issues and patriotism. This shift coincided with America’s entrance into WWII, and while there was no specific “lightbulb” moment in the comics, Superman gradually began confronting larger civic and patriotic issues. With this, Superman became much more diplomatic in his actions and issued the edict that he would never take a life (Beatty). Where once stories featured Superman roughing up toughs, he then suddenly took pains to use the minimal amount of force necessary to fight crime. In 1946’s “Journey into Ruin,” Superman uses sleeping gas to subdue an opponent rather than resort to violence while later in the issue he sternly admonishes a group of cheating businessmen but refrains from delivering the physical lashing seen in his debut. This rise in Superman’s non-violent approach coincided with a shift in storylines to see Superman adopt a more aggressive stance against larger political issues like WWII, endearing him to an audience heavily invested in such concerns and enabling him to create more grounds for identification. The more measured and diplomatic approach strengthened Superman’s “larger-than-life” appeal, strengthening the grounds for identification. No longer was he just a strongman fighting for the rights of the oppressed with a righteous attitude. He quickly became an American icon revered for his “peace-loving warrior” mentality that would have resonated with the American public at that time. Superman was strong enough to stop any evil, and fulfilled his civic duties with firmer moral and ethical boundaries. Because Cherry’s ethos is attached to the ability to assess the interests of the audience and respond in kind, these revisions helped strengthen Superman’s grounds for identification. His approach remained “Truth, Justice, and The American Way” which aligned him with the values of the audience seeking “an inclusive national culture,” an American Way, but his enemies and approach to battling those enemies changed to mirror the change in his audience’s interests, aligning his discourse with theirs in constructing his ethos.

\(^3\) These detectives like Spade and Marlowe whom Superman was modeled after are as synonymous with their gray, less fixed views of right and wrong as they were with their masculine tactics. They willingly broke the law if they thought the end justified the means. Readers should not assume that Superman was similarly vigilante; at times, Superman “took the law into his own hands” but the stronger connection between the Depression era Superman and the detectives was their rigidly masculine tactics. Part of Superman’s early revisions moved him toward a more fixed position in support of the law, but the main motivation for revising Superman was to move him towards a more diplomatic, non-violent character.
Superman’s Initial Ethos

For Superman to offer the grounds for identification during this introductory period, he had to construct an ethos that acknowledges the interests of his audience within his discourse. For Superman this meant embodying the civic and patriotic spirit of the American war engine and then successfully presenting that embodiment to his audience. So successful was Superman at this that he became known amongst his superhero peers as “The Big, Blue Boy Scout,” alluding to the Boy Scouts of America pledge to train young men to make responsible ethical and moral choices. While contemporary versions of Superman will poke fun or scorn his “Big, Blue Boy Scout” nickname, during the Golden Age period, it served to strengthen his construction of ethos by aligning his properties with those of an audience seeking strong moral and ethical heroes. Superman’s ethos was positivistic and strongly didactic—one never had to question the strong moral quality of his character because Superman’s ethos was so closely aligned with ethics, an acceptable practice at the time.

At the heart of Superman’s construction of ethos was his slogan “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” Superman represented a singular truth and a desire to see justice for all, notions that capitalized on the community’s concern for didactic heroes with strong ethics. His referencing of “the American Way” connected him to the concerns of an audience that Ashby writes “was facing a rapidly modernizing world…audiences clamored for traditional values and virtues” (177). Superman’s American Way still included the belief that individual rights mattered, that civic duty was expected, and that hard work was rewarded. It is from this slogan that Wright is able to argue Superman was “unwaveringly objective and impossibly altruistic…there was nothing ambiguous about the hero’s character, cause or inevitable triumph” (184). Superman always was and did “good,” and there was never a question as to whose side he was on or what he stood for. Not only did he do good things, but with his mantra of “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” and nicknames like “Big, Blue Boy scout,” he became the embodiment of good at a time when American audiences wanted strong individual heroes to celebrate in what was a nation’s cultural battle between good and evil. Superman’s ethos strongly laid the foundation for identification.

Superman’s construction of ethos is apparent from the earliest story of his origins, *Superman* 53, when a dying father Jonathan Kent says to Clark, “No man on Earth has the amazing powers you have. You can use them to become a powerful force for good!...You must
fight the evil men who prey on decent folk, in cooperation with the law” (Finger 55)! In this scene, Clark does not question his father save for a “How Dad?” and then immediately appears with the famous Superman costume, ready to save the world. Audiences see in these moments a Superman ready to accept his duty, serving the patriotic ideals of the era. His father’s insistence that Superman “fight the evil men in cooperation with the law” and Superman’s acceptance of such solidify the strong ethical basis for Superman’s ethos. When Jonathan uses the singular “good,” audiences see that this battle is limited to two sides, the good and the evil, and Superman has strongly allied himself with the side of good just as American aligned themselves with good during WWII and the Cold War. When Jonathan highlight’s Superman’s singular power, it only furthers the individuality of his quest at a time when America wanted and needed these strong individual heroes, who were reflective of a national culture.

Even Superman’s superpower properties are cleverly worked in to his construction of ethos, strengthening rather than distancing him from the concerns of his audience. Understandably, these superpowers could be seen as a potential hindrance to Burkean identification because none of Superman’s audience members had these traits in common. The difference between character and audience, in this case, might be too great to lead to the shared interests and values that build grounds for identification. To mitigate this divide between character and audience, early Superman stories use empirical evidence to focus on the relation of Superman’s feats to those found in nature. For example, to explain away his amazing strength, the audience sees how ants lift hundreds of times their own body weight; to rationalize his ability to “leap tall buildings,” audiences see grasshoppers leap what to man would be several city blocks (Siegel 10). Later, when Superman begins to fly, audiences see it is because the Earth’s yellow sun (Krypton is a red sun planet) powers his molecular structure enough to let Superman overcome Earth’s gravitational pull. These scientifically rational explanations were important for Superman’s early audiences and allowed him to present a strong and believable ethos. In adopting this objectively empirical explanation for his superpowers, Superman was aligning himself with the concerns of an audience that feared the unknown and the unexplainable (Ashby, Crothers, Klock). Constructing his ethos around empirical factors and in an objective manner aligned his discourse with the audience interests at the time.

A final characteristic of Superman’s construction of ethos was his reliance on stoicism, the traditionally masculine trait of subduing emotion. Superman rarely allowed emotion to enter
into his identity, as highlighted in one of the first comic book story’s of Superman’s origin, 1949’s “Superman Returns to Krypton” (Superman #61). In “Return to Krypton,” Superman travels through time to unwittingly discover his Kryptonian heritage, his Kryptonian birth parents and how he ended up in the care of Martha and Jonathan Kent. After witnessing his origins, Superman closes the comic panel (the frames on a comic book page) by unemotionally stating, “Now I understand why I’m different from Earthmen? I’m not really from Earth at all--I’m from another planet-the planet Jor-El called Krypton” (Finger 65). He then stoically speeds off to stop an evil-doer without questioning any of what he has just learned. There is no internal conflict in this acceptance of duty; Superman’s response is devoid of emotion as he discovers his origins, and he speeds off without hesitation. This stoicism, when married to an impossibly altruistic acceptance of duty, would become a problem for Superman with later generations, but initially this allowed him to strengthen his ethos in a masculine dominated culture (Ashby) that saw emotion as a weakness.

**The Grounds for Identification**

On circulation alone it could be argued that Superman’s construction of ethos laid an effective groundwork for identification. During his initial five years, the Superman comic book title alone sold 1,300,000 copies bimonthly (Wright 13). That he was quickly remediated to radio, and later to TV when radio popularity gave way to television, shows an audience that had sufficient reason to identify with Superman. This was an audience willing to participate with and accept his character, a phenomenon McCloud argues is essential for identification with characters (42). Even as the comic industry faced emerging forms of media and battled a censorship crisis in the late forties and early fifties, Superman was steadily the most circulated superhero; his archetypal character-in many ways “provided the vocabulary for the Golden Age superheroes” (Wright 16).

Emerging first from the Great Depression and then faced with the evil of the Axis powers during WWII and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, American culture sought strong individual heroes championing America as a place of opportunity, freedom and democracy (Ashby, Crothers). In Superman’s mantra “Truth, Justice and the American Way,” one sees a positivistic, fixed presentation of ethos that mirrors this civic pride American’s felt. Superman’s ethos champions the strong sense of individuality, positivism and goodness (Alcorn, Baumlin & Baumlin) necessary for identification with his Golden Age American audience. This
construction of ethos, however, holds very little nuance, wrapped up as it is in Superman’s “unwavering objectivity, and impossible altruism” (Wright 184).

That Superman’s ethos would promote identification, as absolute as his ideology appeared to be, seems at odds with Burke’s discussion of identification but proves to be the very reason for his grounds for identification during this era. While Burke suggests that absolute positions deny identification, audiences during the cultural climate of the Golden Age connected with the simplistic ethical positivism that Superman presented. That Superman only saw a right or wrong (or a good or bad) meant his discourse had successfully addressed the interests of the audience and was working to align him with those interests, establishing the framework for identification.

As absolute as the positions Superman held were, they allowed an absolute opposite. Superman’s good contrasts with arch enemy Lex Luthor’s evil, promoting identification between Superman and his community in that space of the division between good and evil. The very first appearance of Lex Luthor (untitled, Action Comics #23, April 1940) allows Superman establish such strong, positive positions. When Superman first encounters Luthor, he queries, “What sort of creature are you.” In labeling Luthor a creature, Superman removes the humanity from him. Although Superman is the alien being, he is more human, more recognizable, than Luthor. Luthor’s responds to this questioning: “I’m preparing to make myself supreme master of the world!...I will send the nations of the Earth at each other’s throats so that when they are weakened, I can step in and assume charge” (Siegel 104)! This response marks him as evil at an absurd level, the foil to Superman’s impossible altruism. Superman’s Golden Age community, which faced the absolute evil of the Axis powers in WWII and later the Soviet Union during the Cold War, was more than accepting at the broadest level of these absolute binaries. There was a distinct good and a certain evil. This speaks directly to Burke’s discussion of division inherent in identification; the grounds for identification still existed if there was an opposite, regardless of how absolute those positions were. Superman’s ethos would still ally him to the ethical and patriotic concerns of the audience because he had established Lex Luthor as this opposite.

For Superman’s initial audience, the period from 1938-1957, his absolute constructions of ethos created a strong potential for identification. In Chapter Three, I will illustrate how this failure on Superman’s part to accept ambiguity would slowly begin to erode this potential until he ultimately “dies” under the weight of his positive positions. However, in Chapter Four I will
show how ironically, it will be with help from a softened Lex Luthor that Superman was able to see nuance as a means of restoring that potential for identification.
CHAPTER THREE:
THE MARVEL AGE AND COMMUNITY DIVERSIFICATION

While the concept of identification remains relatively stable, the grounds for identification and the characteristics and values of the audience change over time. The changing nature of these grounds is exemplified in the transition from the Golden Age to the Marvel Age. As the historical factors change between periods, Superman must confront changes to the tools with which he builds the grounds for identification; specifically, this means a change in the construction of ethos. How Superman constructs his ethos and how closely he aligns his ethos to the values of his audience will impact how successful he is at establishing grounds for identification during the Marvel Age. Given that the Marvel Age ends with the death of Superman, it is easy to suggest that he is less than successful at establishing the grounds for identification with his audience.

The Marvel Age is named for the comic period 1958-1992, beginning with the joining of comic artist Jack Kirby and writer Stan Lee at Marvel Comics. At this time, Marvel comics began to capitalize on a culture that was quickly moving away from the Golden Age themes of civic pride, patriotic duty, and larger-than-life heroes who didactically provided all the answers. Marvel Age audiences wanted heroes to be less “larger-than-life” and more “real life” (Waid). The Marvel Age ends in 1992 with the “Death of Superman” story arc, which in addition to seeing Superman die, completes American comics’ transition from the Golden Age to the Contemporary.

During this Marvel Age, the “inclusive national culture” (Wright) longed for and established during the Golden Age began to erode and become more complex. The consensus of American progress, which Superman espoused with his “American Way,” began to fray (Ashby, Wright). This fraying consensus meant Superman would have to target a more heterogeneous audience with diverse interests and values. The fraying consensus in the Marvel Age was influenced by “tension between the traditional [Golden Age] values and an increasingly questioning, divided culture in conflict with this image” (Ashby 404). The importance of a questioning audience should not be lost; Golden Age Superman was allowed to be extremely didactic because his audience bought in to the singular and positive image of “the American Way” he constructed. As the Marvel Age continued to unfold, audiences began to question their place in the world and America’s role in it; their problems did not have simple, easy solutions.
Superman never questioned his choices and never faced the doubt and uncertainty those choices could have carried with them.

The continuation of the Cold War ensured that some of the Golden Age values of patriotism and civic duty remained ingrained in American culture; however, audiences were increasingly questioning the positivism of this image. The Soviet Union still remained an imminent and recognizable threat against which the majority of American citizens were allied; however the positivism in the singular nature of America’s response was not nuanced enough for diversifying audiences who were questioning the absolutism of “the American Way.” The Vietnam War began to erode the public’s confidence in the image of America’s traditional values (Wright). Soon the Civil Rights movement, the Feminist movement and a counter culture movement took advantage of the erosion and as Wright notes, “lead to a rejection of consensus and conformity… and the desire for young, flawed and brooding antiheroes” (212). The positivist image of Superman’s Golden Age “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” became stale as audiences questioned America’s international responsibilities and began a boom in social activism. These cultural changes weakened Superman’s traditional tools, his positivism and objectivity, his stoicism and his binary constructions.

Ultimately, writes Alcorn Jr. “this left the individual characterized by anxiety and restlessness, their internal conflict representative of the diversity in American culture” (19). Where once the power of the American individual was firmly, positively behind an inclusive national culture, the individual in question was no more likely to face moral anxiety and psychological doubts which influenced the larger culture. Audiences were no longer fixed and positive, unfailingly stoic or rigidly objective. These audiences now saw nuance and ambiguity in themselves and wanted their heroes to reflect those characteristics.

Because ethos is constructed through a character’s discourse that seeks to reflect the interests of the audience (Cherry), these changes to American culture during the Marvel Age led to changes in the consideration of ethos. And because ethos is a tool with which to build identification, changes to ethos during the Marvel Age were reflective of changes to identification. During the Golden Age, constructing ethos meant centering discourse around ethics, which worked for Superman and his impossible altruism. As the Marvel Age unfolded, Theresa Enos (who writes about the time period that overlaps what I am calling the Marvel Age) writes that “there are many more tools to construct ethos” (95). This helps in removing the close
ties between ethics and ethos (Enos, Wisse). Ethos has become a more nuanced, fluid construction; a character’s ethics is now just one part of identity. These added “tools” can be any number of things, but specifically they involved a more nuanced and morally ambiguous identity which had greater flexibility in addressing audience interests. Superman has traditionally relied on his “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” and while there are certainly segments of his audience who still saw that as the grounds for identification, a larger portion of his audience found such ethical positivism alienating because they could not relate to such fixed positions.

The importance of this connection between Superman and his audience is characterized by rhetorician Bryan Short, who comments on the link between character and audience: “Discourse depends on shared experiences and values” (370). Here, Short highlights the key building block in identification: a character must construct ethos that allies itself with the values and interests of the audience, at which point a character’s ethos will provide the grounds for identification. While Superman’s outsider identity could have offered these audiences a “realistic” connection that they may have identified with, he continued to eschew that tool in favor of his unwavering objectivity and impossible altruism, almost inhuman traits that denied a shared experience. How many of Superman’s audience at this time could reverse the rotational axis of the Earth to save a loved one? His Golden Age audience might have accepted such an action because they had other strong grounds for identification and might suspend their disbelief especially given the empirical explanation for his abilities. The Marvel Age audiences were less willing to allow Superman’s fixed altruism and objectivity establish grounds for identification.

To highlight the role a nuanced and ambiguous ethos plays in establishing grounds for identification, I return again to the “essences” of Joanna Schmertz’s ethos explored in the first chapter. By arguing for an ethos that is flexible enough to allow for emotional nuance and moral ambiguity, Schmertz provides an understanding of ethos that opens the door to shared beliefs and values. Her “essences” suggest that a character negotiate their discourse at various points to align with the interests of the audience; this fluid approach to constructing ethos only occurs

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4 Again, Burkean identification is the allying of values and interests between one and another despite the inerency of their differences. Identity is the sum of one’s properties, all those things which make up a character; thus, Superman’s identity is at once his physical characteristics, his costume, his superpowers and his belief in Truth, Justice, and the American Way, amongst other things. Audiences will identify with Superman if their interests and values are aligned with his “properties.”
when a character is not positivistic and fixed in their identity. With this door open, the grounds for identification are strengthened.

It was during the Marvel Age that the comic industry began introducing superheroes that were more relatable to an audience looking less for the larger than life heroes of the Golden Age and more for human realism in their characters. Introduced in the 1960s, The Fantastic Four were heroes who, as Stan Lee says, “performed impossible feats but evinced believable human qualities and failings…catering to the moral ambivalence that young people recognized and responded to” (qtd. in Wright 204). The Fantastic Four were joined in the 1960s by Spiderman and The X-Men as superhero “anti-hero” types who dealt with self-absorption, rejection, loneliness and other humanizing traits.

An example of the morally ambiguous ethos demanded by Marvel Age audiences and which Superman struggled to construct is found in Marvel Comics’ The X-Men. Professor X leads the X-Men, a team of mutants with great powers who fight to save humans from mutants and mutants from humans. One of the mutants he fights, Magneto, also happens to be his oldest friend. Like Professor X, Magneto is also fighting for mutant rights, but at the expense of human life if those humans are seen as preventing his rights. They are essentially the leaders of the good and bad forces, yet they are also friends, a factor that adds considerable layers of moral ambiguity to the storyline. Magneto’s positions are not fixed and positive and there are layers to his identity which allow for greater grounds of identification; audiences may view him as abhorrent for his crimes against humanity or identify with his quest for legal rights and freedoms, or more accurately, somewhere in between these opposites. The Professor X/Magneto dynamic has broken down the traditional binary constructions on which Superman has constructed so much of his ethos. Audiences see Magneto and Professor X interacting and responding in a manner Superman would never consider with his arch-enemy Lex Luthor, who is “always up to no good.” People in this era understood the world and human character in more nuanced ways and could relate to characters that weren’t always good, or always evil.

Another Marvel character who gains enormous popularity with the audiences during this era was Spiderman, a hero whose story “always is about his psychological journey” (Morris 1). This psychological journey was most apparent in *Spiderman #121* “The Night Gwen Stacy Died” in which Spiderman watches his love interest, Gwen Stacy, die because he is busy fighting an enemy. Spiderman is a hero who must make choices and sacrifices and then suffer the moral and
emotional consequences that result. With comic audiences wanting “more real life heroes,” Spiderman offered a hero whose complex emotions and moral understanding offered stronger grounds for identification than a Superman who never dealt with consequences or moral dilemmas. Superman could save California and Lois Lane whenever he had to and never faces the consequences of his choices or a dilemma in making those choices. Audiences who were facing the cold realities of Vietnam and struggling with the Civil Rights movement and fight for women’s liberations could not identify with a Superman hero who never struggled with these types of issues. Spiderman and other “real-life” heroes fought crime but also struggled with their roles in the world and the consequences their actions have. Spiderman is notoriously smeared by the local newspaper, *The Daily Bugle* as a crazed vigilante, and this negative press adds considerable emotional stress to his crime-fighting; during the film *Spiderman II*, he even vows to be “Spiderman no more” because of this psychological trauma.

Fittingly, while Superman would always be recognized for his “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” mantra, Spiderman offered up a new slogan for the Marvel Age hero: “With great power comes great responsibility.” Heroes had lives of their own; they did not always have the perfect answer; and they faced consequences for their actions. In short, they were morally ambiguous and emotionally nuanced, more “real life” than larger than life, and more identifiable to Marvel Age audiences because of it.

At this time, Superman was still so identifiable with “goodness” that DC Comics devoted an issue (Superman #153, 1962) to “The Day Superman Broke the Law”; it was a onetime deviation from Superman’s norm, and in subsequent stories he remained as positive and objective as ever. The purpose of the story was to remind readers of the firmness and positivism of his identity, not to begin revising his ethos. Even the plot of Superman “breaking the law” was a stretch. He is arrested for violating hospital noise restrictions while trying to save a child, hardly the moral dilemma or emotional struggle Spiderman speaks to in his “with great power comes great responsibility” slogan. So while technically Superman may have broken the law, he wasn’t doing anything unethical, and there are no strong consequences he is faces as a result of his decision. Superman’s reliance on Golden Age themes continued to erode his grounds for identification.
Revising and Remediating Superman in the Marvel Age

After having been remediated so widely during the Golden Age, Superman was largely seen as a comic book superhero during the first portion of the Marvel Age. This changed in 1978 when the first of four Superman movies appeared, making Superman the first superhero to be remediated as part of a major motion picture. The first two movies, 1978’s *Superman the Movie* and 1980’s *Superman II*, outlined Superman’s origin in bringing the Golden Age version of the hero to the big screen and receiving critical and commercial acclaim in the process. The latter two films, 1983’s *Superman III*, and 1987’s *Superman IV*, maintained Superman’s Golden Age construction but were commercially and critically shunned for adding over the top comedic and farcical elements to their plots. During the Marvel Age, Superman also began appearing in video games and for a short time in 1966 became a Broadway star though neither of these remediations carried the same public appeal of his film, comic book or television versions. (Superman was not remediated to TV during the Marvel Age.)

It wasn’t until late in the Marvel Age that effort was made to revise Superman. This effort—undertaken in 1986 at the height of Reagan’s New Right propagating basic values (Wright)—focused on the nostalgic qualities of traditional Superman and his “Truth, Justice and American Way” ethos of absolutism and rationality. The writer of the revision, John Byrne, spoke in an interview of trying to write Superman “with a Middle America Bible Belt mentality; I felt it was important to have superheroes act on righteous motivations” (qtd. In Wright 266), and for a time, while Reagan was president, this nostalgic construction of Superman established grounds for identification because the Reagan era audience identified with the values Superman was highlighting. However, this revisioning reconfirmed Superman’s Golden Age properties—his positive individualism and alien persona—when comics and America were moving towards a human realism. This move denied Superman the full range of his tools to construct ethos, instead tying his discourse to the strong moral character favored by Golden Age audiences but less accepted within the Marvel Age communities. In this 1986 John Byrne revision, Superman’s rational objectivism is so emphasized that his Kryptonian ancestors are said to have moved beyond emotion, living in a cold, scientifically dominant environment (Beatty). The scientific objectivity Superman inherited connected him to Golden Age audiences who saw binaries of black and white, good and bad, but did not acknowledge and understanding of audience interests.
during the Marvel Age. This would be Superman’s only major revision of the period, and its limits were quickly acknowledged in 1992.

**Superman’s Construction of Ethos and the Grounds for Identification**

The most damning construction of Superman’s ethos comes not from one of his traditional outlets, but rather through a Batman graphic novel, Frank Miller’s 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns*. In this Batman revisioning, Superman appears as an agent for the United States government, serving at the beck and call of the President of the U.S. In this role, Superman is charged with maintaining order and civility, and much to Batman’s chagrin, Superman does so willingly and without question; he has a duty to protect America and attacks his job with objective rationality. The ethos Superman constructs here is wrapped in the Golden Age logic of civic pride, patriotic duty, and a stoically objective understanding of issues. Superman’s tools remain centered on Golden Age values; this failed to connect his discourse to an audience whose interests were much more complex.

The illustration of Superman in *Dark Knight Returns* responds to Superman’s tendency during this Marvel Age to maintain his Golden Age construction of ethos. Superman’s properties were firmly recognizable; he was objective and stoic, impossibly altruistic, and continued to see the world as constructed in binaries. There was no nuance to his character, an idea captured when social critic James Bowman suggested “[Superman’s] invulnerability included (before twenty-first century revisions) an invulnerability to emotions as well as bullets…as we would expect of this interplanetary visitor, he didn’t have much of a human side himself” (66). Superman’s Kryptonian ancestors are show to have removed emotion from their lives as if it were a weakness. This plays out in *Superman, the Movie* when Jor-El speaks to Superman and instructs him to suffocate his emotions because they are a “human” trait. In other remediations, Superman deals with emotional moments (the death of his father, his exchanges with Lois Lane), but the emotion is always overshadowed by something else in these scenes; his father’s death is quickly overshadowed by Superman’s newfound understanding of his heroic potential. There is no time for tears or reflection when duty calls.

Bowman highlights Superman’s “larger than life” heroisms which during the Marvel Age forged an ethos that did not ally itself to the interests of the audience and presented itself throughout his film and comic remediations. Failing to use the full array of tools at his disposal, Superman continued to use discourse aimed at presenting his strong moral character to the
audience, a tendency Enos would suggest correlates to the Golden Age patterns of ethos (93). This construction of discourse lacked the moral ambiguity and emotional nuance which would provide him the grounds for identification with this Marvel Age community.

Superman’s recognizable “invulnerability to emotion” present throughout his comic appearances is perpetuated in *Superman, The Movie*, the first major studio film featuring a comic book character. For people who knew of Superman but did not read comics (they are a niche product), *Superman, The Movie* would be the first in-depth exposure to him as a whole and the first time he would have a chance to connect to a much larger and more diverse audience. While 1978 was a time when comic books were mirroring an American culture exploring moral ambiguities, Superman’s origins and ethos had not been revamped.

Potentially powerful scenes like when a young Clark Kent deals with his father Jonathan’s death (used as a rite of passage for Clark) are “very long shots” at great distances to deemphasize the emotional impact on the characters (Bignell). In these scenes, Clark Kent may be crying or hugging his mother for support, but the emotion of the moment is secondary to the plot movements. Later, significant portions of the movie are spent in Superman’s “Fortress of Solitude,” an isolated space in the arctic where Superman learns of, and communes with the spirit of his Kryptonian father Jor-El. The structure’s name alone, “Fortress of Solitude” works towards highlighting Superman’s alien heritage; he is not one of us. Rather than allying Superman to community members who could identify with isolation and abandonment, this fortress walls Superman off from his humanity by removing him from the human world. In the fortress he is alone and untouched by humans, free to interact with the remains of his Kryptonian legacy which was highlighted by stoic empiricism. It also emphasizes the notion of the heroic individual. One may assume that Superman may go to the Fortress to let down his guard or his wall of invulnerability, but Jor-El is quick to suggest that Superman come here to get away from humans. Implied is the need to move away from the weaknesses and emotion of humans. The notion here is that if Superman were left on his own, or at least in a more Kryptonian space, he would not struggle with his emotions because they would not be present.

Emphasizing the didactic nature of Superman’s Golden Age ethos, the relationship between Jor-El and Superman explored in the Fortress becomes that of teacher and student. Superman shows only wonder at learning of his true heritage and of his origins. Happiness, anguish, sorrows: nary an emotion crosses Superman’s face as he soaks up the wisdom of Jor-El.
As Bowman suggests, Superman truly could be as invulnerable to emotions as he is bullets in these scenes. As the relationship unfolds, Jor-El is the objective scientist dictating “all the collected knowledge of the 28 known galaxies” to Superman. Again, this harkens back to values of the Golden Age community, but was considerably less appealing to Marvel Age audiences who were beginning to question the “answers” their government was giving them. Jor-El and Clark’s discussions in the Fortress always follow a pattern of scientific, logical facts, handed from Jor-El to Superman with the one allusion to anything emotional coming when Jor-El informs Superman that it is only natural to have emotions. While Jor-El admits emotions are natural, he tells Clark that he must learn to control and suppress them. Emotion will not be a tool to connect with his audience for the Marvel Age Superman, but a weakness that can impede him. However, in constructing his ethos in part around “invulnerability to emotions,” Superman fails to acknowledge all the tools available to construct ethos and to connect with the interests and values of his audience.

This emotional invulnerability is just one problem Superman has in establishing an ethos that would form the grounds for identification for this particular audience. Superman’s ethos in *The Movie* is also constructed around distance and solidarity, absolutes and rationality. It does not acknowledge the nuance or ambiguity Burke suggests is necessary ground for identification. At a moment during the movie in which Superman should have the potential to connect with his audience—Lex Luthor’s attacks have left Lois Lane dead, buried in a landslide—Superman arrives at the scene too late, shattering the heavens with a primal scream. While losing a loved one is certainly a direct appeal to the emotions of the audience and would certainly provide grounds for identification, Superman doesn’t have to deal with the consequences of this loss. He immediately flies fast enough to reverse the rotational axis of the Earth and in so doing, he travels back in time to save Lois. Superman no longer has to choose between saving Lois or millions of others; he simply does both, escaping the moral and personal dilemma that he faces in this scene. This closing act magnifies the objective delivery of Superman’s ethos. No audience member need question what s/he would have chosen after Superman removes the need for another choice with dire consequences in either case. Superman is not a hero who suffers through problems like his audience members. Instead, he avoids problems through the use of his super powers, thus alienating him from audience members who have suffered in some way and want to
see superheroes reflect that suffering. Superman’s ethos in this setting erodes his grounds for identification.

Superman’s discourse throughout the film centers on his traditional mantra “Truth, Justice, and The American Way,” which during the Golden Age had been his tool to establish identification. The positivism of this stance is highlighted during the first formal interaction between Superman and Lois Lane. It is a scene replete with sexual innuendo: “You’re 6’4” and 200lbs, is everything else in prop…I mean can you/do…” “Do I eat Miss Lane? Yes, when I’m hungry.” Superman is coy and playful in his responses, Lois daydreamy and infatuated with her questions. Audiences can begin to see a Superman with more emotional nuance than his traditional construction. With his playful responses, Superman is toying with the rigid and masculine objective approach his Golden Age predecessor would have assumed, exposing the potential for enough ambiguity to establish grounds for identification with this Marvel Age audience.

These tender moments are interrupted and overshadowed, however, by Superman’s positivist dialogue: “What to you believe in?” “Well, I stand for Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” “Come owwwww!” “I never lie Miss Lane!” This last line is said with such absolutism that there is little doubt of Superman’s ethos, which is firmly fixed in a dichotomous world in which you lie or you don’t. It is a world where there is a positivistic Truth with a capital T.

While Keith Miller suggests ethos should allow audiences to seek out their own answers within a character’s identity, here that option is removed. Superman doesn’t lie, ever! The tender emotion from the scene, two lovers meeting and flirting for the first time, is overwhelmed in the positivism of Superman’s ethos. This objectivity and positivism was not a discourse that acknowledged the interests of the audience at the time and thus weakened the potential for identification.

Ethos is supposed to function as a tool in laying the grounds for identification. For the Marvel Age Superman, this was not the case. In fact, he so failed at assessing the audience interests and portraying himself as representative of those interests that he was ideologically and literally killed in the year long story arc “The Death of Superman,” in 1992. Wright captures Superman’s failure to accurately assess the values of his Marvel Age audiences suggesting, “The Death of Superman was a metaphor for American culture in the post-cold war era…Americans were rejecting the traditional ‘family values and virtues’ common to Golden Age audiences”
Superman died in part because audiences no longer identified with him. They no longer found grounds for identification with him because his main tool for establishing identification, his ethos, remained a Golden Age construction whose discourse centered on positivism and objectivity.

Superman’s traditional positivism, stoicism and objectivity, once the main way in which audiences identified with him, became a fundamental flaw during the Marvel Age. DC Comics acknowledged this when they killed Superman. Towards the end of the Marvel Age, Mark Waid acknowledged this erosion of the grounds for identification: “To kids today, as the stars and profiles of Batman, Spider-man, and Wolverine have risen, Superman has become increasingly irrelevant. As a pop-culture force, he enjoyed his greatest impact nearly a half century ago” (5). Batman became a movie star in the late 1980s, and film studios soon would exploit some of the edgier, more realistic faire seen in graphic novels of the time, quite different than the storylines of the Superman movies which continued to champion the impossible altruism and unwavering objectivity that removed the real life qualities of Superman.

There is one scene in the “Death of Superman” in which Superman is asked to defend his actions in battle: “It was the only way, and now I have to go it alone” (unnumbered). This Superman response maintains his Golden Age identity; he is positive, stoic, and stands for the rights of the individual. He alone will save the world, something he does without having to weigh consequences. Like the “Truth, Justice, and American Way” slogan which he clung to during this time, his “Death” response did not lay a fertile ground for identification because it was so at odds with the interests of his audience. Rather than constructing a discourse that portrayed him as aligned with the audience interests, Superman was again singling himself out. Here he is the quintessential Golden Age image, the real construction which dies in this storyline.

Superman’s tools to establish grounds for identification failed him in this Marvel Age. Critics like Lina Lofario suggested, “The Man of Steel is looking a little rusty. He's not tragic. He's not cool” (70). Recognizing the audience desire for more realistic heroes, Lofario is acknowledging Superman’s failure to demonstrate the moral ambiguity and emotional nuance that his peers had begun thriving upon. Spiderman’s slogan “with great power comes great responsibility” speaks to the psychological burden that he faces while he choosing to fight crime, and it is a measured and thoughtful response hinting only at possibilities. Spiderman’s slogan
would come to represent the Marvel Age culture because it acknowledged the “tragic” elements Lofario identified as an audience interest while highlighting the moral nuance necessary to fight crime in this new world. Superman’s truth and justice is flush with his Golden Age positivism and moral certainty, and his construction of ethos weakens his grounds for identification.

**Concluding the Marvel Age.**

It cannot be said that Superman was universally incapable of laying the groundwork for identification; a statement like this during the Marvel Age would deny the audience its diversity. The first two Superman films, *Superman The Movie* and *Superman II*, each benefited from strong critical and commercial success. Identification within *The Movie* is a complex subject considering Superman’s continued reliance on Golden Age tools to reach a Marvel Age audience, yet there was a part of this audience which appreciated Superman’s film remediation for its reminder of America’s past values. It could be said that the legacy of Superman’s ethos established grounds for identification during these first two films, but that once the novelty of seeing Superman on the big screen wore off, his outdated methods were exposed in the later two films and proved to be a mortal flaw in the “Death” story arc. Unsurprisingly, Mark Waid writes on this Marvel Age, “Unfortunately for Superman, no longer will Superman be accepted for doing what is right, he will be questioned by society for doing it so rigidly, so automatically” (7). The question facing the post-death Superman would be whether he could reestablish the grounds for identification his Golden Age character had built or find new grounds by adapting to the interests and values of his contemporary audience.
CHAPTER FOUR:
SUPERMAN’S CONTEMPORARY ADVENTURES

The cultural themes that began to emerge during the Marvel Age have continued to unfold since the death of Superman, meaning the contemporary Superman faces an audience atmosphere similar to the one to which he failed to adapt during the Marvel Age (especially the later part, beginning with and following the Vietnam War). The broad similarities between the Marvel and Contemporary Ages afford the Contemporary Superman an opportunity to change the flaw in his construction of ethos and then work towards strengthening his grounds for identification.

Superman’s audience continued to revolve around “cynicism, irony, and moral relativism” (288) suggests Wright, which means that the pattern begun in the Marvel Age will continue in the Contemporary, necessitating heroes to explore their own psychological tensions and question their roles in society rather than acting impossibly altruistic. Jean-Francois Lyotard in part defines this Contemporary period as denying the existence of grand narratives. These grand narratives—which became quite popular during the Golden Age—were overarching cultural themes that offered singular and oftentimes mythic understandings of American life. The myth of the American Frontier is one such narrative; it informs the audience’s understanding of behavioral patterns, in this specific instance, that Americans will continue to explore, go forth and prosper, and that it is their destiny to do so. Superman’s ethos based around “Truth, Justice and the American Way” is the ultimate American grand narrative, capitalizing on the myth of the American Frontier. The slogan suggests mythic values of America’s dominance, individual opportunities, and the possibility that everyone could achieve those freedoms. This is a major issue for Superman, who had used his slogan as the primary tool in allying himself with his audience interests during his Golden Age.

Theorist Peter Brooker adds to the understanding of Lyotard’s Contemporary American suggesting that a breakdown of the traditional grand narrative marks the end of opposing binaries and the beginning of an exploration of identities (Brooker). Brooker suggests that in this Contemporary period, audiences value nuance and ambiguity. Good and Evil will no longer be absolute and fixed positions; rather, there will be layers to good and evil. Instead of two halves, Brooker is suggesting America will be defined by layers. Thus, when he discusses an exploration of identities, he is really arguing for an understanding of the nuance and ambiguity inherent in humanity. Brooker’s argument significantly weakens the traditional tools Superman has used to
construct his ethos. Not only will Superman have to accept the breakdown of his positivistic “American Way,” he will also have to demonstrate more nuance than his traditional binary constructions have allowed. Superman was once able to save Lois Lane from a landslide without having to deal with the emotional consequences of a decision he made, but it is now that moral and emotional tension that audiences are clamoring for. Because audiences are seeking grounds for identification with heroes who are “just like them” (Gough, Waid), today’s heroes spend as much time battling their conflicting emotions and inner doubts, weighing down their once easy, uncomplicated flight.

Superman’s traditional tools—his positivism and objectivity—have eroded his grounds for identification with today’s audiences because they conflict with the values and experiences of a Contemporary audience. Superman’s traditional rationalism leaves his ethos lacking in one other domain: the integral humanity of emotion (Weaver). With audiences demanding more human, real life superheroes, a hero must involve emotional appeals in their discourse to capture this humanity, which again turns us back to Cherry’s discussion of ethos. Will this Contemporary Superman accurately assess the values of his audience and then construct a discourse that aligns him with those values?

In their research on American pop culture in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Leroy Ashby and Lawrence Crothers return again and again to one theme: emotion. Emotion is a characteristic of culture that has become more accepted, more necessary for characters, and more demanded by audiences as America has transitioned from the Golden to the Marvel and to the Contemporary Age. Now, argues Arnold, audiences need superheroes to “suffer our heartbreaks, reflect our anxieties and embody our weaknesses” (77). Part of being a “real life” hero in this contemporary period means fighting crime and heartbreak, or battling evil and anxiety simultaneously. Emotion then should be viewed as an additional tool with which to construct ethos and lay the grounds for identification, unlike the weakness Superman considers it in *Superman, the Movie*.

Rhetorically, Henry Jenkins ties Burkean identification to emotionally engaged audiences. Superman must understand that today’s audiences value emotional appeals and that part of aligning his ethos with the interests of the audience will be appealing to their emotions. These emotive appeals will form grounds for identification with today’s audiences.
This increased focus on emotion is of course a problem for the Superman, who has traditionally shown “invulnerability towards emotion” (Bowman) and whose Kryptonian ancestors were said to have moved beyond the human weakness that is emotion. This Golden Age Superman didn’t need to construct an ethos around emotional appeals, but audiences saw in the Marvel Age a Superman who continued to respond stoically when they wanted emotional depth. The important consideration for Superman moving forward, however, is not that he himself is strengthened by his emotions, but rather by showing emotion—by utilizing emotive appeals—his ethos is made more human and thus forms grounds for identification with the contemporary audiences.

**Revising and Remediating a Contemporary Superman**

Superman’s “death” in 1992 killed off the Golden Age construction of ethos that had eroded his grounds for identification; however, it also opened the door to revise him for the Contemporary era. During an interview with internet fansite Kryptonsite.com, co-creator of *Smallville*, Al Gough highlights this quandary of identification facing Superman in the Contemporary period:

> Unlike, say, Batman, Superman has always been the goody two shoes of super-heroes. We wanted our Clark Kent to have angst and edge, without losing the essence of who he grows up to be … we wanted to re-interpret Superman for today and make him more relatable. We’ve humanized him in a way you haven’t seen before. We really wanted to get inside Clark’s head and show that he’s just as vulnerable as any ordinary teenager. This is a kid who’s not only going through puberty but is also struggling with his emerging superpowers.

Here Gough highlights the need for Superman to align his discourse to the audience interests, something he had largely failed to accomplish during the Marvel Age. The language Gough uses—“angst and edge,” “relatable,” “vulnerable… ordinary… struggling”—sound as if they were lifted directly from Ashby’s or Wright’s commentary on American popular culture. American audiences in the Contemporary period wanted “relatable, real life heroes” who still fought crime but did so while dealing with emotional and psychological issues. The key in the interview is Gough’s reference to Superman’s essence. Superman—and his superhero peers—must maintain the heroic nature they are known for while also exploring their human characteristics, rather than suppressing them with unwavering objectivity and impossible altruism. We will see on one
Contemporary revision a change to this “essence” which comes back to haunt Superman. Today’s audiences still want the hero, they just can’t identify with the larger than life ones.

In Smallville, Superman is revised to highlight his emotional nuance and moral ambiguity. While Clark (in Smallville, Superman is always Clark, which again highlights his humanity over the alien or superhero persona) may exhibit extraordinary powers, he must learn to use these powers in the face of many things a “typical” teenager would also deal with: unrequited love, conflict with parents, a desire to be accepted, and complex friendships. Clark loves Lana Lang and longs to be with her, but his crush is made more heartrending when Lana’s jock boyfriend is shown to be a nice guy. Clark must struggle to deal with his emerging love and the presence of Lana’s other interests. One the one hand, he has to be the “good guy” but it is not without sacrifice and moments of weakness; he can’t be truthful to Lana while hiding his secret. Part of Lana’s pensivity about Clark’s advances is because she “can’t trust him; she knows he’s not fully honest with her but can’t understand why. That he would struggle over this issue suggests a layer of moral ambiguity not seen in the Golden or Marvel Age construction. Clark additionally faces the pressures of fitting into a social group (he struggles to get his dad to let him play football, and he runs for class president to appear more normal) and the burden of keeping deep personal secrets from his friends. Audiences see Clark facing issues they themselves would be confronted with in similar situations whereas the Golden and Marvel Age Superman never questioned keeping his identity a secret from his friends.

Smallville’s Clark Kent will become Superman, and we the audience know this, but on his journey he is faced with choices he must make, self doubt, and fear. This Clark sees nuanced constructions of good and bad rather than strict binaries; he is a much more nuanced superhero than the Golden Age Superman, and this less positive position will work towards building the framework for identification.

Smallville began airing in 2001, but the themes of emotional nuance and moral ambiguity established in the revision were carried to other media as well. In 2004’s Superman, Birthright, The Origin of the Man of Steel, the Smallville revisions were carried over to Superman’s comic book stories which retold the origin story of Superman to emphasize his psychological and emotional journey from a young Clark Kent to Superman. In 2006, Superman was revised for film in Superman Returns, and the exploration of nuance and ambiguity continued. When Director Bryan Singer was asked if Superman Returns is more emotional than a typical
superhero movie targeted for teenage boys, he responds, “Oh yeah…this is my first chick flick…Superman is so lonely in this film, it feels personal…there’s definitely something about his dilemma I can identify with.” Audiences see a continuation of the personal dilemma storyline that capitalizes on the interests of a Contemporary audience. Also of note, though, is Singer’s characterization of this film as a “chick flick,” which is intended to highlight the emotional elements of this Superman revision which would align his discourse with the audience’s values. This genre switch removes Superman’s heroic essence; he shifts from an action hero to a whining, jilted lover. It is a revision which significantly erodes Superman’s ground for identification with his Contemporary audience. Ultimately, as important a tool for identification as emotion may be, audiences still see it as just one tool. In the case of Superman Returns, it would prove to be a faulty one, but nonetheless, it shows a commitment to explore the values of Contemporary audiences in ways that Superman’s Marvel Age predecessor was unwilling or unable to do.

Superman’s remediations continued as well. While remediated again to film and television during the Contemporary, the most important of Superman’s remediations was his move to the internet. Fansites such as Kryptonsite.com and DevotedtoSmallville.com feature fan fiction, forums and webvideos, many of which speak to the fans’ acceptance of Clark’s ethos and ability to identify with him. The official Smallville website “smallvillevip.cwtv.com” even allows fans to create Superman specific user profiles in addition to blogging, posting fan pics and using fan forums. Superman’s remediation to the digital provides him with yet another tool to construct his contemporary ethos and build grounds for identification, but it is also proving to be a tool Superman is hesitant to use to its full capacity. Superman has yet to produce original storylines in the digital and has also not moved to the “comics coming to cellphones” stage which some heroes are exploring. His failure to explore the full capabilities of this digital medium could mean a failure to adapt to the audience’s values and interests; however, at the time of this thesis, Superman’s digital presence at least maintains some important grounds for identification with the Contemporary audience.

Superman’s Construction of Ethos

While not universally successful, the Contemporary Superman has shown a much greater tendency to understand the interests of his audience and to work towards constructing his ethos to connect with those interests, especially acknowledging emotional nuance and moral
ambiguity. Highlighting his human realism rather than his alien heritage, Superman is most successful in his *Smallville* revision.

*Smallville* revises Superman by blurring his traditional binary constructs (rational versus emotional thought, right and wrong), to create a character less positively fixed and more emotionally nuanced than the traditional Superman. Clark’s nuance is more pronounced because his father’s world is tied strictly to grand narratives with good and evil, right and wrong constantly sparring in a dichotomous battle. Jonathan’s positivist nature allows the creators of *Smallville* more latitude in establishing Clark’s ambiguity while maintaining Superman’s traditional sense of moral obligation and heroism. *Smallville* will maintain Superman’s heroic essence, but explore the journey towards this end (Gough).

Because of Jonathan’s innate, positive goodness, Clark has been raised to be “good” and respects his father for his views, allowing Clark to maintain the strong ethical framework that has been his primary tool in constructing ethos. Clark does his chores around the family farm and speaks out against his high school football coach for improper practices. In this sense, the viewer sees Clark as the ethically good person they know he will become; Jonathan Kent has successfully instilled the values of right and wrong in his son. Yet because Jonathan is there to provide the positive stance on these values, Clark, who is not fixed and absolute in his positions, is allowed to explore the boundaries of those constructs for himself, much like any teenager who must determine if he will embrace and internalize the values and beliefs instilled by his parents.

The creators of *Smallville* have some fun with acknowledging Clark’s nuanced character at the expense of Jonathan’s positivism at the conclusion of the pilot episode. Clark responds to Jonathan questioning if he is OK by replying, “Can you get back to me in five years?” suggesting that his identity is not positive and fixed but a work in progress and openly inviting the audience to participate in its construction over the next five years. Like the typical teenage member of his audience, Clark is still struggling to understand his relationship with his parents, the nature of his friendships, and the idea of love. These are not relationships that one easily fits into, but they are to be explored and will remain dynamic. Like the typical teenager, Clark wants to understand this. In relation to Jonathan’s positive construction of ethos which relies on good character, Clark is demonstrating a willingness to explore the wider range of tools at his disposal. In the same manner during the pilot episode, when Clark pines to feel “normal” by playing football or accepting a gift from Lex Luthor, he is appealing to audience members in showcasing his
essential humanity. It is an appeal which seeks to establish the grounds for identification with the values, beliefs, and experiences of his Contemporary audience.

Clark and Jonathan’s patterns of behavior play out throughout the Smallville series and come to a head in the show’s 100th episode. Like the “Death of Superman” story arc, which metaphorically closed the door on Superman’s Golden and Marvel Age construction, Smallville’s 100th episode, “Reckoning” uses a death scene to highlight the differences between Jonathan’s positivism and Clark’s Contemporary constructions of ethos. As part of this, Clark has to experience the consequences of a decision he makes, unlike the traditional Superman who uses his powers to avoid such dilemmas.

“Reckoning” starts with Clark unburdening himself of his secret identity to Lana Lang and in so doing, releasing from himself years of anxiety and emotional turmoil. It connects Clark to Lana in an intimate way; the barrier he felt earlier in the show is now gone. This is a human side of Clark Kent that the Golden Age Superman simply did not possess. Traditionally, Superman talked of love, but the struggle with love, the struggle with trust that goes much deeper, is new in this Contemporary revision. Revealing his secret is doubly difficult for Clark because his father Jonathan is absolutely against anyone knowing Clark’s secret and always has been, as is the case with positivists. Even a potential loved one cannot be trusted. Jonathan’s absolute response will erode his potential for Burkean identification because it does not demonstrate the nuance or ambiguity that Contemporary audiences value. Clark’s struggle with the issue allows audiences to make their own choices. And what is more human or more “real life” than Clark’s desire to express the truth to Lana, even if it means going against his father’s wishes? Ultimately the audience will have grounds to identify with Clark’s humanity because his presentation of ethos can be viewed as emotionally nuanced.

At “Reckoning’s” midpoint, Lana is killed in a car accident: the genesis of this event being Clark’s secret and the danger associated with knowing it. Clark arrives at the scene too late to do anything but shatter, emotionally. This marks another strong departure from traditional Superman presentations. Clark’s utter helplessness as he holds Lana’s body and the gut-wrenching heartbreak in his heavenly shout are moments that emphasize his humanity and his real life heroism, not his larger than life, reverse the rotational axis of the Earth heroism. Reminiscent of the Lois Lane death in Superman, the Movie, the main difference with the Smallville Clark is that his powers cannot overcome any problem, and he is left to confront his
emotions. No longer is Clark invulnerable to emotions and unquestionably able to produce a happy ending; rather here audiences see Clark as just like them, someone who must deal with loss and heartbreak and the helpless feeling of being at fate’s whim. Adding to the weight of Clark’s burden is his understanding that this happens to Lana because she knew his secret; he bears much of the responsibility for her death. This is the same burden that Spiderman has felt since the death of Gwen Stacey, but not one the traditional Superman ever had to bear.

Following these events, Clark is given a choice. If he wants to bring Lana back, he must face the consequences; someone else will have to die in her place. The audience sees that the unlimited possibilities available to the Golden and Marvel Age Superman are taken from him, that he must make a choice. It is a moment that encourages the audience to “seek their own answers” (Miller) because Clark cannot dictate a happy ending to them. This discourse let’s Clark portray a nuanced ethos: is Clark the lovestruck, selfish teen who will do anything to save Lana, or does he respond in the traditional Superman’s impossibly altruistic manner by letting Lana die then moving forward? Either way, we know that Clark will experience a significant loss that will cause him pain, something he has not presented to audiences up to this point. In constructing his ethos this way, Clark uses a more open ended discourse which shows he has assessed and understood the interests of his audience. This Contemporary ethos strengthens the grounds for identification whereas the ethically positive and stoic Golden Age Superman’s absolutism erodes those same grounds.

In the end, Clark chooses to save Lana at the expense of another. Though Clark doesn’t know it at the time, this other is his father, leaving Clark to bear the terrible burden of knowing that although his choice saved Lana, it directly causes the death of his father. This one choice will influence his relationship with his mother certainly, but every time he looks at Lana, Clark is also reminded of his choice and his consequences, complicating their relationship even further. Clark comes to learn, like his audience members, that choices do have consequences and that not everything ends happily-ever-after. It leaves Clark much less certain about his “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” and much more connected to Spiderman’s “great power…great responsibility” slogan representative of the Marvel Age heroes who fought crime and their own psychological battles. The events in “Reckoning” solidify Clark as a “real-life” hero whose emotional heartbreak and moral ambiguity mirror the audience’s desire for heroes to experience
psychological tensions and nuanced identities. Traditional versions of Superman did not exhibit this level of depth.

**Grounds for identification**

As with the Marvel Age revisions of Superman, understanding his relative success at establishing the grounds for identification during the Contemporary period is complex. Unlike the Golden Age, which saw an audience seeking out the “inclusive national culture” which Superman reflected, first the Marvel Age and now the Contemporary have seen a fraying of this homogenous community. Within this diverse community, some tools used in building grounds for identification are proving more successful than others. During the Marvel Age, Superman continued to construct a Golden Age ethos which was well received during his first two films, but later led to his “Death” story arc for its failure to maintain those grounds. Superman’s contemporary revisions have focused on his emotional nuance and moral ambiguity, tools which built the grounds for identification in *Smallville* and its comic book follow-up *Superman, Birthright*, but eroded those same grounds in the most recent Superman film, *Superman Returns*. Mark Waid’s 2005 *Superman Birthright: The origin of the Man of Steel* adopts many of the same strategies as *Smallville* as it seeks to revise the origin of Superman for a contemporary comic book audience. Waid even notes in commentary at the close of *Birthright*:

> “Who am I and why am I here?” is the keynote for reimagining Superman. Superman’s character arc will be that of in fact deciding who he is rather than letting it be decided for him….Our audience is of a generation that doesn’t want to identify with “living symbols” who exist to inspire. No, our audience wants to live vicariously through heroes who symbolize their rebellious spirit and understand their frustrations. (291)

Like Gough does in *Smallville*, in *Birthright* Waid and his team are attempting to take Superman from a fixed, objective, and unemotional character who never faces a choice of alternatives to a character nuanced enough to suffer the burden of expectations and still save the girl. The “living symbol” ethos which Superman’s audience long sought no longer provides discourse ambiguous enough to foster identification.

*Birthright* succeeds in establishing ground for identification in part by having Superman and Lex Luthor mirror the dynamic of Professor X and Magneto in The X-Men, a pattern adopted from the *Smallville* revision. Anyone familiar with Superman’s mythology knows that
Lex is his arch-nemesis, but here we move away from the absolutism of Luthor’s traditional evil and towards an ambiguous presentation that encourages a more layered response from Clark. Because Lex possesses a more nuanced ethos, Clark cannot respond with his traditional, absolute position.

Clark and Lex meet as teenagers in the town of Smallville, Kansas, and relate to one another as outsiders; Clark of course is “different” and Lex is already one of the smartest people in the world. Clark and Lex’s relationship highlights the idea of Burkean Identification; despite the audience’s understanding of the end Superman/Lex relationship, here audiences are confronted with a Clark who identifies with Lex because their values are aligned. During one conversation between the two, a young Lex snarls ultimatums at Clark, to which Clark responds: “Don’t be so positive” (171). Waid cleverly milks the traditional positivism of Superman to illustrate that this Contemporary version is much less focused on absolutes and certainties and much more willing to see ambiguities of substance. It is understood that Superman is a deeper and more nuanced character for it.

Despite their earlier friendship, in the end Birthright sees Superman and Luthor at odds. Superman’s final battle with Lex Luthor is filled with rage and frustration, emotions that appeal to his audience and help establish his ethos. Superman maintains his heroic essence but shows a willingness to accept his emotions rather than a desire to subdue them. In traditional Superman stories, Superman is content to have Luthor arrested and thrown in jail; justice is more than enough to teach Luthor the error of his ways. In Birthright, Superman viciously punches his former friend across a room. Superman’s traditionally stoic response is left behind in favor of an acknowledgement to the innate humanity he possesses. His natural emotional responses of rage, anger, and confusion are not internalized and are part of a direct appeal to audiences to appear more human and more fallible.

Superman’s emotional nuance and moral ambiguity which are so successful in establishing grounds for identification in Smallville and Birthright are less so in his most recent movie remediation. Filmed in 2006, Superman Returns represents a revised look at the Superman mythos, adjusted to better connect with today’s audiences than the Superman who so heavily relied on “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” In the film, Superman relies heavily on emotion to align his discourse with audience member interests. Singer’s use of “chick flick” captures the emotionally nuanced look that would build grounds for identification with
contemporary audiences, but it also marked a genre switch for Superman, moving him from the traditional action movie arena populated by superheroes to the emotionally turbulent world of romance and drama. This genre switch proved to weaken Superman’s grounds for identification because it did not maintain Superman’s heroic essence adequately. Al Gough’s interview response suggests exploring Superman’s identity without losing sight of what his true essence (his heroism) was. Singer’s revision shifts the dialogue from action to emotion, rather than allowing the emotional appeals to support Superman’s action elements.

Film critic Ryan Gilbney captures the feeling of the majority of audience members and critics in arguing that the Superman of Superman Returns “feels more like Sufficientman […] while Batman and Spiderman have turned more neurotic, more nuanced, the makers of Superman Returns seem unsure of how to tweak their hero to fit the 21st century. It results in karaoke on a grand scale” (41). Gilbney’s argument suggests that Superman Returns borrows heavily from the original Superman films, adding in dashes of emotion that make Superman appear whiny, weak, and unsympathetic. Superman Returns is barely sufficient, and audiences did not find this revision appealing.

Gilbney’s inclusion of Batman and Spiderman as stronger contemporary characters because of their neurosis supports the arguments discussed in the preceding chapters on the nature of identification and continues the trend established by Wright, Waid, and Gough in highlighting the success of these characters over Superman. The grounds for identification change over time because changes in historical time periods affect the tools used to build those grounds. Ethos, one tool in building identification, relies on assessing the interests of the audience and constructing discourse in such a way as to represent those interests and values. Implied in this concept is the need for a nuanced identity which is capable of meeting the various interests of the audience at various times. Gibney again shows that for Superman, his grounds for identification are tenuously established.

After 1992’s “Death” arc killed off the traditional Superman construction, the Contemporary Superman is revised to include emotional nuance and moral ambiguity within his arsenal of tools to construct the ground for identification. In some cases, as in Smallville and Superman, Birthright, this is done successfully, whereas in other cases, like Superman Returns, the transition from traditional to Contemporary finds stumbling blocks. In either case though, we
see significant revisions in Superman as he attempts to assess and respond to the values and beliefs of his audience to better align his values with theirs.
Conclusion: The Man of Tomorrow or the Man of Yesterday? 

Amongst his superheroes peers, Superman is known as “The Man of Tomorrow,” but astute audiences may question if he would be better known as “The Man of Yesterday.” Born in 1938 and having enjoyed a strong seventy-year career as an American icon, Superman has at various times been considered “barely sufficient”; “tired, not cool, not tragic”; and “outdated” by various critics. Mark Waid notes that Superman enjoyed his greatest successes almost fifty years ago.

These labels apply to Superman because he has faced a foe far deadlier than kryptonite and more complex than Lex Luthor during his career and not always come out on top: identification. Scott McCloud’s discussion of comic characters--“The degree to which an audience identifies with a character determines the relative success of that character” (42)--articulates the problem Superman faces. Characters (like Superman) will succeed if the audience finds grounds for identification with them. At those points when Superman was merely “sufficient” or “tired.” His grounds for identification with his audience had clearly eroded.

Identification is a Burkean concept that argues one is by nature different from another but when their interests and values are aligned one may be identified with another. Burke calls those things which establish the grounds for identification properties, although they are just as easily seen as tools. These tools are the sum of an individual’s identity, including “properties in goods, in services, in position or status, in citizenship and reputation” (1327). The challenge facing Superman during his career is that both the tools for identification and the audience change over time and during different time periods; what may help Superman build grounds for identification may erode in the next. The critical commentary of Waid, Wright, and others suggests Superman has not consistently established grounds for identification because he does not always accurately assess and then mirror the values of his audience.

Ethos is one of the tools (or properties) with which a character like Superman may promote identification. The relationship between ethos and identification is acknowledged in Roger Cherry’s definition of ethos: “the assessment of the characteristics of the audience and constructing discourse in such a way as to portray oneself as embodying those characteristics” (255). To construct a credible ethos, then, a character must understand the audience interests and use discourse to illustrate that they themselves hold a similar position. To use his ethos as a tool for building grounds of identification, Superman must understand the values of his audience during each distinct historical time period and construct his discourse to reflect those values.
Superman’s Golden Age ethos was a strong tool in establishing grounds for identification; in the Marvel Age, this same construction of ethos eroded those grounds. As Superman transitions into the Contemporary, we see him begin to make use of a greater array of tools. In *Superman, Birthright* he becomes a vegetarian and begins using a laptop computer; these subtle moves add more human realism to his identity and suggest that he is technologically savvy and willing to consider alternative lifestyles like vegetarianism. These moves alone generally won’t be enough to build the grounds for identification, but they do work towards constructing a more nuanced ethos, which works toward such grounds for identification. This was the type of move Superman did not have to make in the Golden Age because ethos was largely constructed around good moral character. It was the type of move Superman did not make during the Marvel Age to his detriment. As the construction of ethos became more nuanced, Superman continued to rely on his good moral character. The Contemporary sees Superman begin exploring his nuance and ambiguity.

In Chapter Two I explored Superman’s Golden Age, the period beginning with his introduction in 1938 and ending in 1958 with the introduction of a new breed of Marvel superheroes. Although he started out as a masculine, anything-goes Depression era hero, Superman was quickly revised to adopt more patriotic and non-violent themes. This Golden Age saw a nation looking for an “inclusive national culture” (Wright) and Superman responded in kind. His “Truth, Justice, and The American Way” slogan established him as an iconic hero whose good moral character was never in doubt, who represented the civic values his audience demanded and whose strong individual exploits reaffirmed the powerful myth of America as land of individual opportunity and freedom. During the period, Superman was frequently remediated to take advantage of his popularity, and because of his success in laying ground for identification, he continued to serve as the archetypal superhero through the 1940s and ‘50s.

The third chapter looks at Superman’s transition to the Marvel Age, beginning in 1958 when Marvel Comics began introducing more “real-life” heroes and ending in 1992, when Superman “dies” in the comic storyline “Death of Superman.” Superman constructed his discourse in a manner similar to his Golden Age predecessor, relying on his strong moral character and “American Way.” In his first two film remappings, *Superman, the Movie* and *Superman II*, this ethos worked to build ground for identification with some community members, but largely throughout the Marvel Age, Superman was little more than iconic
figurehead, surpassed in popularity and acceptance by newer superheroes. These new superheroes, largely created by Marvel Comics, worked to reflect the values of the Marvel Age audiences, which were largely distancing themselves from the “inclusive national culture” of the Golden Age. At this time moral relativism was demanded, and Americans were less sure and less positivistic about themselves and the country. Comic characters had to be less “larger-than-life” and more “real-life” if they wanted to form grounds for identification. Spiderman became the symbol of these new Marvel Age heroes, his slogan “with great power comes great responsibility” suggesting the psychological tensions and moral ambiguities even superheroes must face. Superman failed to exploit these tools and in 1992 “died” because of this failure. His Golden Age construction of ethos had eroded the ground for identification during the Marvel Age.

Superman’s Contemporary Age, explored in Chapter Four, begins immediately following his 1992 “death” and is marked by the continued exploration and complexity of cultural themes begun during the Marvel Age. The primary theme to emerge in the Contemporary period is that emotional appeals are increasingly used as a tool to construct a discourse that aligns itself with the values of the audience. After failing to fully explore the full range of tools at his disposal during the Marvel Age, the Contemporary Superman is revised to explore his emotional nuance and moral ambiguity. In Smallville and Superman, Birthright this is accomplished by establishing a friendship between a young Superman and a young Lex Lutho so that even though audiences know Luthor will become his arch-enemy, Superman is given the opportunity to move beyond his traditional Golden Age construction of ethos which revolved around a fixed moral character and binary constructions. Superman’s remediation to the Internet, best seen on the fanpage Kryptonsite.com, hosts a series of forums, fanfiction and weblogs which illustrate the successful manner in which Superman has established the grounds for identification in the Contemporary. An additional revision, the 2006 film Superman Returns, also seeks to take advantage of the potential held in emotional appeals. The result, however, is “barely sufficient” in part because the film has been made into a “chick flick” that bolsters the emotional appeals seemingly at the expense of Superman’s heroic nature. Because Gough and Waid suggest that a contemporary Superman should explore his nuance without losing sight of his heroism, this film revision is less successful in establishing grounds for identification with the Contemporary audience.
Ultimately, I argue that the grounds for building identification follow the zeitgeist of each historical era. When the cultural values are largely unified, the tools for building identification are fewer, but the grounds easier to construct. As cultural values diversify, individuals are afforded more tools to use, but they must be used in more complex and fluid ways, and the grounds for identification are largely tied to presentations of emotional nuance and moral ambiguity.

While I chose to research the historical nature of Superman and his grounds for identification, this study sets up intriguing avenues for further exploration in other areas. Given the generic shifts and resulting criticism experienced by the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, researching the relationship between genre and ethos, or genre and its effects on identification, would prove interesting. This shift certainly worked to erode Superman’s grounds for identification; the question now would be why. While the Superman mythos remains the same across media, each presentation does make use of different generic forms; *Smallville*’s use of the teen soap format to highlight its emotional content is just one example. While focusing on romance and emotion in the movie weakened Superman’s grounds for identification, the same focus on *Smallville* strengthens those grounds. Exploring the genre forms utilized in each Superman revision would enhance the understanding of the interplay between revision, remediation, and audience.

A second opportunity exists to explore the impacts each remediation had on the Superman revisions and how the audiences interact with his different media texts. Audiences can already see how certain remediations influence revisions to Superman; Superman flies on radio first because it is easier to describe in scenes than “leapt over tall buildings,” and his digital appearances are offering new ways for audiences to interact with him and identify with him. It is understandable that as Superman is continually remediated, the different media forms will afford Superman different tools with which to work and different audiences he must reach. While this study focused on Superman’s revisions in relation to identification the opportunity certainly exists to explore the relation between Superman’s remediations and identification.

Superman was created during the Golden Age of comics and flourished because his mantra “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” tied his discourse to the values of a homogeneous community. Where Golden Age ethos was often a construction of strong moral character, Superman needed few tools to establish his grounds for identification. As Superman
struggled to transition to the Marvel Age and now finds himself in a period of considerable revision in the Contemporary, he has worked to broaden his construction of ethos to include emotional nuance and moral ambiguity so that his grounds for identification continue to strengthen. Superman can continue as “The Man of Tomorrow” and appears likely to do so.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ryan Hoyle was born in Boston, Massachusetts, 1981. He received his B.A. (Communications) from Bridgewater State University in 2003 and following his completion of Master’s degree, will pursue his Juris Doctorate from Florida State University’s College of Law. Prior to his time at FSU, Ryan worked for three years as Budget Analyst, Contingency Operations with the United States Marine Corps.