

# Searching for a Self

Identity in Popular Culture,  
Media and Society

by

**Arthur Asa Berger**

San Francisco State University

Series in Sociology



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To my grandchildren, Ariel, Kavanna, Seth, and Noah



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The events of people's lives have, after all, only to the least degree originated in them, having generally depended on all sorts of circumstances such as the moods, the life or death of quite different people, and have, as it were, only at the given point of time come hurrying towards them. For in youth life still lies before them as an inexhaustible morning, spread out all around them full of everything and nothing; and yet when noon comes there is all at once something there that may justly claim to be their life now, which is, all in all, just as surprising as if one lay suddenly there were a man sitting there before one, with whom one had been corresponding for twenty years without knowing him, and all the time imagining him quite different. But what is still much queerer is that most people do not notice his at all; they adopt the man who has come to stay with them, whose life has merged with their own lives and whose experiences now seem to them the expression of their own qualities, his destiny their own merit or misfortune. Something has had its way with them like a fly-paper with a fly; it has caught them fast, here catching a little hair, there hampering their movements, and has gradually enveloped them, until they lie buried under a thick coating that has only the remotest resemblance to their original shape....

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*



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A Marxist scholar, and professor at Westminster University in London.

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A sociologist, and professor at King's College in London.



## Preface:

# Takeaways from *Searching For a Self*

After reading this book you will have learned something about:

1. The basic concepts of semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce, and how the study of signs can help us understand identity better. Among the topics discussed are biosemiotics, hairstyles, eyeglass styles, facial expressions, and body language.
2. Important concepts from sociological theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu and how they can be applied to the study of identity. This chapter will deal, among other things, with informal high school groups, national character, and individualism.
3. Some ideas of Freud and other psychoanalysts such as Erik Erikson, which help us understand the psyche and identity. The discussion will also deal with identification authenticity and borderline personalities.
4. Theorists such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Fritz Pappenheim, and Erich Fromm about alienation and other topics that can be applied to the study of identity.
5. The existence of a remarkable book by Nigel Dennis, *Cards of Identity*, that is about a club that can change people's identities to suit the club's purposes by discovering their most "useful" identities.
6. The important and destructive role that Vodka plays in Russian culture and other aspects of Russian identity involving a theory about how some Russian babies were raised and its cultural impact.
7. The "Impostor Syndrome," discussed in my academic mystery *Mistake in Identity*, and how it can be applied to Donald Trump to explain his psyche and behavior.
8. "The Broadway Riders," who wear the clothes of motorcycle riders but don't have motorcycles, as a case study of the role of fashion in identity.
9. Contemporary theories about gender, with a focus on the ideas of Judith Butler about gender as a "performance" and how these ideas can be applied to "non-binary" Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersexual, and Asexual people.
10. The way the clothes of Orthodox Jewish people help establish their religious identities and set them off from non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews.

11. The ideas of the Marxist semiotician Roland Barthes, as found in his book *Mythologies*, about various mystifying aspects of contemporary French culture.
12. The role that tattoos play in shaping people's identities.
13. The “cult” cars made by Porsche and the role of these cars in the lives of people who own this brand of automobile and enjoy the benefits of “German engineering.”
14. How elite universities perform branding for their students and the role this branding plays in their lives.
15. The role membership in the Republican Party plays in shaping people's political identities, plus a fanciful theory about how the toilet training of children is related to their membership in the Republican Party. The enigma of the 2020 election and the role that working-class authoritarianism plays in the Republican Party are also considered.
16. How taking cruises is connected to the myth of Odysseus and how cruising creates an identity for people that they find positive. The discussion also deals with different typologies for travelers and the notion that tourists are now “models” for modern mankind.

**Part I:**  
**Theories of Identity**



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Gentlemen, this is an historic moment for the Identity Club....Our beloved theory, the only true one in the world, is the only one we want to hear about. Identity is the answer to everything. There is nothing that cannot be seen in terms of identity. We are not going to pretend that there is the slightest argument about *that*. We of this club excel all other clubs in that we give our patients the identities they can use best. We can make all sorts of identities, from Freudian to Teddy Boy to Marxist and Christian. We are the idea behind the idea, the theory at the root of theory. And what we like about ourselves is the frank work we go about our work. Other clubs stubbornly deny that they try to supply their patients with new identities. They insist that they merely reveal an identity that has been pushed out of sight. Thank God, gentlemen we shall never be like them! We are proud to know that we are in the very van of modern development that we can transform any unknown quantity into a fixed self, and that we never fall back on the hypocrisy or pretending we are mere uncoverers.

Nigel Dennis, *Cards of Identity*

How do people turn out the way they do? How they “arrive” at themselves and attain an identity. There are countless matters to consider when dealing with identity, which, as Nigel Denis reminds us, “is the answer to everything.” How are our identities affected by our birth order, by our hair color, by how tall or short we are, by our intelligence, by our occupation, by our race, by our religion, by our nationality, by the socio-economic level of our parents (or our being raised in a single-parent family), by where we are born and where we grow up, by the language we learn, by the way we use language, by our fashion tastes, by our gender, by our education, by our psychological makeup, by chance experiences we have, by the people we marry (if we marry) and by countless other factors.

### **Robert Musil on The Man Without Qualities**

In Robert Musil’s great novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, he offers some insights into what happens to people as they progress through what we call now the life cycle. He begins with a chilling simile: that at some moment in our lives we suddenly become strangers to ourselves and it is as if we were flies that had

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## About the Author



Arthur Asa Berger is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, where he taught between 1965 and 2003. He graduated in 1954 from the University of Massachusetts, where he majored in literature and philosophy.

He received an MA degree in journalism and creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1956. He was drafted shortly after graduating from Iowa and served in the U.S. Army in the Military District of Washington in Washington DC, where he was a feature writer and speechwriter in the District's Public Information Office. He also wrote about high school sports for *The Washington Post* on weekend evenings while in the army.

Berger spent a year touring Europe after he got out of the Army and then went to the University of Minnesota, where he received a Ph.D. in American Studies in 1965. He wrote his dissertation on the comic strip, *Li'l Abner*. In 1963-64, he had a Fulbright to Italy and taught at the University of Milan.

He spent a year as a visiting professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at The University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1984 and two months in the fall of 2007 as a visiting professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism in Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He spent a month lecturing at Jinan University in Guangzhou and ten days lecturing at Tsinghua University in Beijing in spring, 2009. He spent a month in 2012 as a Fulbright Senior Specialist in Argentina, lecturing on semiotics and cultural criticism, a month in Minsk in 2014 lecturing on semiotics and popular culture, and two weeks lecturing on semiotics and media in Iran in 2015. He is the author of more than one hundred articles and more than eighty books on semiotics, media, popular culture, humor, and tourism.

Berger is married, has two children and four grandchildren, and lives in Mill Valley, California. He enjoys foreign travel and classical music. He can be reached by e-mail at [arthurasaberger@gmail.com](mailto:arthurasaberger@gmail.com).



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