NOT JUST FOR LAUGHTER: THE SOLEMN FACET OF ART SPIEGELMAN'S *MAUS*

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Reference Images to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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What is usually disregarded as "semiliterate, cheap disposable kiddie fare,"[1] as comic artist Scott McCloud ironically states, the comic has trekked its way over into the solemn territory of the Holocaust in Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale My Father Bleeds History*. Far too controversial for its time of production during the 1970s, as well as openly denied by various publishers, *Maus* infuses a not so simple story with simple drawings that sketch out his father's testimony of one of the most appalling events in history. In doing so, Spiegelman captures the essence of the catastrophe that is the Holocaust. Contrary to what one might believe, the comic may be unorthodox, but not unfitting for this topic. This seemingly incompatible pair proposes how "the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories,"[2] as literary scholar Hilary Chute proclaims. *Maus* is a paradigm of why graphic novels are necessary to teach events that are at times terribly difficult, even perhaps impossible, to wholly represent. By bringing into focus the problem of historical understanding, which stems from the disparity that exists between the spectators and the participants of history, Spiegelman is able to illustrate why the comic fills in where literary composition lacks. Moreover, *Maus* is successful as a medium for conveying a survivor's testimony because it repurposes its genre, uses metaphors and symbolism to alienate audiences from the story. Through this alienation, Spiegelman is able to thwart sentimentality on part of the reader and present his father's story as a means to scrutinize the past. This story of a Polish Jew enduring occupation, persecution, and almost execution becomes something able to be taught, rather than something simply to be pitied.

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[1] Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 3.

[2] Hilary Chute. *The Shadow of A Past Time: History and Graphic Representation in Maus.* (Twentieth Century Literature, 2006), 14.

The reader's perception is impacted initially by a genre that deviates from the standard Holocaust narrative. The comic book form becomes a means to make an all too familiar story new again. As, Professor of German, Gail Hart remarks on Holocaust literature, "There comes a point when people are numbed by sheer repetition of a story everyone already knows." In other words, no matter the event, there inevitably comes a peak that every story reaches in capturing and demanding the audience's attention. She concludes, however, "*Maus* serves as an intervention to this collective numbness that sometimes results from over application. Spiegelman makes one look at it as if it were something new."[3] Naturally, readers believe that a recurring topic implies recycled knowledge. With an atrocity like the Holocaust, however, there is no fulfillment in understanding; the unrepresentable can never be fully learned. It is necessary, therefore, that *Maus* exists apart from the norm and offers a new tint onto this opaque history.

Although these stories are not meant for entertainment, nor even for reader enjoyment, *Maus* has found a way to "reacquaint us with the horrors of genocide in the most offhand and intimate of ways,"[4] as, Professor of English, Charles Hatfield states. Spiegelman uses a seemingly meaningless exchange between Mala, the father's second wife, and Vladek, the author's father, to allude to the functionality of *Maus* itself. When Mala initiates to discuss the significance of a book for "people who don't usually read such stories will be interested" in, Vladek responds by justifying that he himself, who is normally no fan of comics, is greatly fascinated. Mala retorts his assertion, however, by exclaiming, "Of course you are interested. It's your story!" Then their dispute ends with Vladek concluding in his broken English, "Yes, I know

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[3] Gail Hart, interview by Jenny Ji, May 20, 2015

[4] Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature.* (The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 140.

already my story by heart. And even I am interested."[5] It is a representation of the idea that among the sea of stories of Holocaust survivors, perhaps this survivor's tale renders itself as new and unique. In the same way that Vladek can become intrigued by his own story, one he undeniably knows every detail of, the audiences can receive *Maus* in this way as well. In a society so easily jaded by familiarity, Vladek's insight on his own story is significant in how the quality of newness accommodates *Maus* and its story.

Spiegelman transcends not only the norm in Holocaust literature through use of the graphic novel, but also the norm in the world of comic art as well through his inclusion of an additional comic book, "The Prisoner on Hell Planet"[6], within the plot of his comic *Maus.* Within his own work, Spiegelman is able to prompt audiences on what power comic books potentially harness. This suggestive inference is shown through the dialogue of the author and Mala. After he discovers that his father had found his earlier released comic, Mala consoles and speaks with him about it. Spiegelman is bewildered at why his father chose to read "The Prisoner on Hell Planet" when he normally takes no interest in Spiegelman's work. Mala interjects him by reflecting, "but this isn't like other comics…it was so personal…but very accurate and objective."[7] Alongside Mala's reflection, the audience is "left to ponder the paradox that, perhaps more than any history book or documentary, it is a comic book of horrors that enables ourselves to confront the meaning of history,"[8] as, Professor of English, Arlene Wilner states. Then Mala's

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[5] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 135.

[6] Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, 102.

[7] Spiegelman, 106.

[8] Arlene Fish Wilner. "Happy, Happy Ever After: Story and History in Art Spiegelman's Maus." In *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust,* edited by Deborah R. Geis. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 121.

observation can be seen as a comment to *Maus* itself, again. It introduces what the graphic novel is constructed to do and symbolizes what the graphic novel is set to function as. This message is given to the readers almost inadvertently by the dialogue between the author and Mala. Their interchange becomes a guide that directs *Maus* as a comic that is "personal, accurate, and objective," leading audiences to clearer understanding of how the graphic novel serves his father's testimony.

Furthermore, as the reader is taken from third person to first person perspective via Spiegelman's rereading of "The Prisoner on Hell Planet," it allows Spiegelman to establish the comic within the comic as a rhetorical device. By incorporating this comic that told the grim tale of his mother's suicide, Spiegelman uses this combination to reveal a tension between personal memory and representation of that history. Intentionally setting the short comic not just alongside, but in conjunction with *Maus* enables him to demonstrate exactly what issue is present in Holocaust literature, namely the inability on part of the reader to completely comprehend what the Holocaust survivor experienced. This incapability becomes *Maus's* strength, however, for *Maus* operates both as a novel to convey one's testimony and an "extended essay on the pitfalls of trying to represent the unrepresentable,"[9] as Hatfield states. Spiegelman's inability to clearly illustrate every aspect of the events of his father's experience, such as keeping the mice's faces white and bare of expression throughout the novel, parallels the stark difference between memory and representation.

Distinguishing the differences between the two works through the way the graphics are illustrated, the audience is able to recognize the divergence between the *Maus* and "The Prisoner

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[9] Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature.* (The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 139.

on Hell Planet" as an implicit message. There is, undeniably, a variation in recounting events that are familiar and those that are unfamiliar. The illustrations throughout *Maus* are sketch-like, very detailed in the background which represents the historical context, yet hard to distinguish the expression of characters in the foreground which represents the personal memory. It exemplifies how one struggles to clearly grasp understanding of a story that is not one's own. Spiegelman demonstrates just where and when the gap between personal memory and historical context are shown to be insufficient. The "Prisoner on Hell Planet," however, not only depicts illustrations that have incessantly detailed background, but also provide almost grotesquely intimate recollections of the personal memory of Spiegelman's mother's suicide through the expression on the protagonist's face. Specifically, there are panels on the second page of the comic that depict his father's reaction to the suicide. His father is shown clinging onto Artie, as he exclaims, "I was expected to comfort him!"[10] The graphics are disconcerting to look at, for the father's face is shown with harsh lines that boldly outline his macabre expression. The audience sees the ghoulish eyes staring at them from the page and the story's intensity makes it more personal than those depictions in *Maus*.

Both comics, however, merge as a whole to bring into focus the complications of being asked to remember and reflect on a memory one never had. *Maus* reaches its conclusion when Vladek finally divulges to an eager Spiegelman that the remnants of his mother's diaries, journals, and letters had been burned and thrown away by Vladek himself. Spiegelman becomes upset, disregards his father's feelings, and begins to yell at him. All the while, Vladek is trying to rationalize with Spiegelman why he chose to do so. "I was so depressed then, I didn't know if

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[10] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 103.

I'm coming or going!"[11] Vladek exclaims. However, the author begins to turn away and the final panel of the comic is Spiegelman with his back turned and a boldly worded "murderer"[12] enclosed in a thought bubble. The author's unwillingness and inability to understand why his father would throw away his mother's belongings is indicative of how the spectator of history often struggles with comprehension. Similarly, Vladek as a participant of history, tries to explain to his son the woes of his heart, but concludes defeatedly, "ach."[13] This helplessness in explaining, on part of Vladek, is suggestive of the irreconcilable differences between memory and representation. Spiegelman can only understand his father's story insofar as his father is able to elucidate his experiences.

Despite the fact that this vast separation exists between the spectators and participants of history, the graphic novel is able to give a more nuanced representation of survivors' stories. The comic book form of *Maus*, namely the juxtaposition of words and images, allows a visual representation to portray a brutality beyond what the dialogue is able to express. For example, Vladek narrates an experience about seeing a Nazi officer swing a child into a wall.[14] Although the detail is gruesome in itself, when paired with the depiction of a child and a wall drenched with his blood, the reality is far more unsettling. With dialogue alone, it leaves room for the problem of sentimentality, prevalent in Holocaust literature, to permeate. As reflection inevitably begins to turn inward, the reader no longer focuses outwardly on the events that took place. With

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[11] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 161.

[12] Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* 161

[13]Spiegelman. 161.

[14] Ibid. 110

both the sketches and dialogue together, however, the reader becomes engaged in the way that the author intends and the focus is shifted back to the author's vision.

Additionally, Spiegelman uses this juxtaposition of words and images to convey a stronger message than words alone could give. In another example, Vladek recounts how he and Spiegelman's mother headed toward a neighboring town in order to escape the Nazi occupation. He states, "We walked in the direction of Sosnowiec—but where to go?!"[15] The dialogue here shows how Jews struggled to escape persecution moving from town to town in fear and unconfident in their next destination. The sketch alongside the dialogue depicts Vladek and his wife holding hands walking down a path. At first glance, it seems just an ordinary drawing, but the path that the two are walking on outlines a swastika. This combination, allowed by the comic form, symbolizes that not only were Jews struggling to chase safety, but also trapped by the Nazis no matter where they chose to go.

What Spiegelman does in *Maus* goes beyond just illustrating and narrating his father's story, he "commands viewer involvement," as McCloud states, by severing a phenomenon called "closure"[16]. Closure is a literary technique often employed by authors to call in reader imagination to allow active participation in a story "by showing little or nothing in a given scene."[17] This same imagination is what allows thoughts to become consumed by questions of personal reaction, as opposed to concerned with the ruthless actions portrayed. In *Maus*, however, Spiegelman gives explicit directions via the dialogue and paired images. In doing so, he estranges readers from the story because it sets limitations for the audience to imagine the text

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[15] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 127.

[16] Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 63.

[17] Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* 86.

that they read. For example, the depiction of the child's blood splattered against a wall becomes a means to scrutinize a past with an objective lens. This presentation of an illustration puts the perception through the eyes of Vladek, the author's father, rather than the audiences own. A necessity so that, as formerly mentioned, reflection can be focused outwardly, rather than on oneself.

Furthermore, Spiegelman uses comic book form as a way for the audience to face the devastating ordeals of the Holocaust by presenting what is difficult to represent in a doubly impacting manner. For instance, Vladek recounts on a memory that he had when the relocation of Jews first began to affect him. After being forced to relocate by the Nazis into specified ghettos, he became constrained to buy goods only upon availability with rationed coupons. The black market in Sosnowiec, however, allowed Jews to buy and sell goods without restriction. One of these sellers had been Vladek's friend, Cohn, whom he "did much business with."[18] When the Nazis had discovered this, many were arrested. Following this, Vladek went into the town's courtyard and four Jews, including his friend Cohn, were hanged there and left as an ominous threat for a week. The audience comes into realization with the events portrayed twice. Once through the initial reading and a second time through realization that these events are not just drawings in a comic book. By using fantasy to mirror reality, Spiegelman makes it so that the mouse figures are no longer just sketched mice on a string, but real people truly strangled to death by a rope.

The ability of *Maus* to successfully convey Vladek's story can be paralleled to the way that, Professor of German, Jack Zipes articulates the effectiveness of fairy tales to be dependent

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[18] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 85.

"on the innovative manner in which they make information of the tales relevant for listeners and receivers of them."[19] The "innovative manner" in which Spiegelman delivers his story, beyond its genre, is through the use of the most evident and most powerful extended metaphor in *Maus*: Spiegelman's animal allegory. This allegory coordinates cats as Nazis, mice as Jews, and pigs as Poles. By using the archetype of the cat and mouse relationship, Spiegelman is able to introduce the prey and predator correlation between Nazis and Jews. The use of this popular archetype is how Spiegelman modifies the story of the Holocaust "relevant" for modern audiences. So, it becomes clear through the allegory that not only were the Nazis asserting their power over the Jews, but also asserting their belief of inherent superiority, mirroring the way in which the cat innately victimizes the mouse.

Many scholars have criticized this allegory, however, claiming that Spiegelman illustrates the "Nazi theory" by pitting "one biological species against another," as literary critic Hillel Halkin condemns. He goes on further to assert that, "The Holocaust was a crime committed by humans against humans and to draw people as animals…is dehumanizing."[20] This dehumanization, however, is just what Spiegelman wanted to capture when exploiting this allegory in his graphic novel. In fact, in Spiegelman's *MetaMaus* an extended commentary on *Maus*, he states that Hitler had been the "real collaborator" on *Maus*. After seeing a poster that advertised "Jews as vermin," it became clear to Spiegelman that "this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project."[21] So while indeed it is true that the Holocaust was a crime

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[19] Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion. (*New York: Routledge, 2006), 171.

[20] Ken Tucker. *Cat's, Mice, and History—The Avant-Garde of the Comic Strip.* (The New York Times, 1985), 3.

[21] Art Spiegelman. *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 114.

between all people and not certain species in opposition, Spiegelman's animal allegory is representative of something larger than just an association of races as one animal or another.

Just as Nazi propaganda dehumanized Jews to vermin, Spiegelman anthropomorphizes these otherwise meaningless creatures to give them life and substance. It is evident that the animal allegory is a personification of animals, as opposed to dehumanization of people, through the way that Spiegelman uses animal masks alongside the standing and talking cats, mice and pigs. Specifically, when Vladek is able to escape from the prisoner of war work camp by way of deceiving the train man, Vladek is depicted with a pig mask tied on top of his mouse head.[22] The character's ability to simply conceal his appearance mimics the way in which humans are able to disguise their personas. This is an important distinction to make because of the fact that by giving animals human qualities, it allows audiences to be dissociated from the characters. Furthermore, Spiegelman creates a controlled environment in which these animals behaving as humans can be examined for their actions, rather than for their outwardly qualities or characteristics.

Even through the countless examinations, however, our longing, as spectators of history, to fully grasp knowledge on the past is insatiable. Simply, because it is impossible. In the same way that Spiegelman will never comprehend his father's experience, we are left in limbo between personal memory and history. The absence of personal memory, however, no longer has to inhibit understanding. For *Maus*, and graphic novels alike, can sketch the void between reader imagination and survivor experience. The unique ways in which the story can be delivered to audiences, whether that be through the use of metaphors or symbolism, expands the possibilities

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[22] Art Spiegelman. *The Complete Maus.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 66.

for awareness and appreciation of a history that seems so distant. Although this paper discusses the ways in which *Maus* is able to represent the necessity of graphic novels in teaching serious topics, like the Holocaust, through its ability in thwarting sentimentality and limiting imagination, is mystery really such a concern? Why are our sympathies, sentiments and personal reflections so readily met with hostility? Especially in the realm of Holocaust literature? Despite the fact that Spiegelman's *Maus* is now closed and secured between other books on a shelf, the inquiry has only begun and, with every thought, it is exponentially growing.

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