



Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2020

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/llr>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/llr.61>

ISSN: 2221-6510 (Print) 2409-109X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://journals.umt.edu.pk/llr/Home.aspx>

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To cite this article: Naila Sahar (2020). Multimodal Historiography in Spiegelman's Maus and MetaMaus, *Linguistics and Literature Review* 6(1): 57- 74.

To link this article: <https://doi.org/10.32350/llr.61.05>

Published online: March 31, 2020

Article QR Code:



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A publication of the
Department of Linguistics and Communications
Institute of Liberal Arts
University of Management and Technology
Lahore, Pakistan

Multimodal Historiography in Spiegelman's *Maus* and *MetaMaus*

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ABSTRACT

Art Spiegelman's act of writing (and drawing) *Maus* is an act of breaking silences. It's an act of reinterpreting and reconstructing history. By collecting personal memories of his father, Spiegelman recovers, commemorates and recollects the collective heritage of a trauma in a society, where denial and erasure are primary tools of historiography.

Keywords: Historiography, comic, memoir, memory, trauma, holocaust, multimodal

Introduction

There has always been a social stigma attached to comic books. This paper aims to look at Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as a genre that falls under both an autobiography and historiography. *Maus* is Spiegelman's psychological quest and accomplishment in blending together public and private history. Comic books in America had hardly ever been used to address real lives and actual events, however this comic mode made certain allowances to Spiegelman to deal with a complex subject. Recent literary theory's attention to the relation between the verbal and visual medium grants Spiegelman's work an additional force and dynamism. Research questions that will be addressed in this paper will include but will not be limited to:

- How Art Spiegelman enabled his comic book *Maus* to integrate a serious theme while being cognizant of social stigma that is attached to comic books?
- Was Art Spiegelman eligible enough to write about one of the most traumatic events in the history of mankind?
- How the larger and longer segments in comic-book medium allow a story to develop in multifarious length and span?
- How the drawings empowered Spiegelman to shape the rationale, pace and sequence of events meticulously?
- How Spiegelman accounted for historical accuracy as he was accused many times for disrespecting the grim reality of Holocaust by depicting it in comic-book medium?
- How relation between word and image on a paper offer a kind of vigor and potency to this book?

- How Spiegelman used funny animal genre to defamiliarize the Holocaust narrative as it has already been told and retold several times?
- Is *Maus* a meta-narrative?

Using theoretical frameworks of Said (1979), Spivak (1983), and Hall (1993) this paper will address the aforementioned questions while unraveling the dynamics of knowledge and power, cultural imperialism and subaltern, and the act of imaginative rediscovery which the conception of the rediscovered, essential identity entails.

***Maus* as a Comic Book**

Comic books are usually perceived as written solely for the sake of entertainment, tailored for a specific kind of audience. There has been a social stigma attached to comic books which determines that comic books can never merit serious critical analysis. Though the subject matter for comic books remained unsophisticated for long, their structure always had the potential to integrate a serious theme. Art Spiegelman's success comes from recognizing this capacity in comic books. In an interview to National Public Radio (1986), Spiegelman said that his primary concern in *Maus* was to make it all true. His this claim to literal truth in *Maus I* and *II*, and his representation of historical phenomenon of Holocaust in it gave an anti-comic bent to a comic book. This artistic feat of using a comic medium for a serious subject was so unusual, that the Pulitzer Prize committee encountered problems to evaluate 'a project whose merit they could not deny but whose medium they could not quite recognize' (Doharty 1996: 69). The problem however got resolved when the committee decided to give this book a 'special award'.

While writing about history, the very first concern to any writer is the question as to who is eligible enough to write about a specific event in history. The hierarchy of remembrance usually in this case belongs to the hierarchy of grief that someone has endured. Spiegelman's authority to speak on Holocaust comes out of his necessity to fathom the situation of his parents, who were the survivals of Holocaust, and from his urge to break the silence they always imposed on the trauma they suffered at Auschwitz. Witek (1989) puts it in his book *Comic Books as History*, 'Though *Maus* was nominated for the Book Critics Circle Award in biography it is perhaps more precisely an autobiography. In order to live his own life, Art must understand his relations with his parents. To do so, he must confront the Holocaust and the way in which it affected Vladek and Anja.'. *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997) is thus not only the story of Art's parent's survival in Holocaust, it is also writer's own narrative of his complex relationship with his parents. Its subject is also the way children of Holocaust survivals felt the burden of survival and the way it changed their lives. In his chapter 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet', Spiegelman talks in first person narrative, giving his readers a peep into his guilt and paranoia that he inherited from his parents for the first time. His emotionally oppressed parents injected their frustrations, fears, distrust and obsessions in him, and thus Spiegelman shouts to his mother who has committed suicide,

Congratulations!... You've committed the perfect crime.....You put me here... Shorted all my circuits... Cut my `nerve ending... And crossed my wires!...You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!! (103)



Figure 1. Maus, p. 103

Here Spiegelman gives us his motive of writing about Holocaust; he couldn't take the silence anymore! His mother, leaving him without any clue of her death and what she was suffering, left him utterly clueless. The mystery of Holocaust haunts him, and he has to make it a linear narrative so to make sense out of what's just a mesh, an obscure webbing. Writing is catharsis for him. In an interview to National Public Radio (1986), he said:

In order to draw *Maus*, it's necessary for me to reenact every single gesture, as well as every single location present in these flashbacks. The mouse cartoonist has to do that with his mouse parents. And the result is, for the parts of my story—of my father's story—that are just on tape or on transcripts, I have an overall idea and eventually I can fish it out of my head. But the parts that are in the book are now in neat little boxes. I know what happened by having assimilated it that fully. And that's part of my reason for this project, in fact.

Spiegelman's effort to put it all in 'neat little boxes' is an effort to make sense out of an event that overwhelmed him to the extent of affecting his mental condition. His indication that he stayed at mental hospital indicates that Holocaust didn't end when it ended, it damaged the posterity with an equal violence.

Personal and Political History

Maus charts the personal and political history, the past and present of Holocaust survivors. Greg Denning writes in *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Denning 1994, 88), that history is not the past but is the consciousness of the past which is then used for present purposes. *Maus* is Spiegelman's attempt to remember an episode he lived through his parents. James E. Young writes in *At Memory's Edge* (2000), 'Throughout its narrative, *Maus* presumes a particular paradigm for history itself, a conception of past historical events that includes the present conditions under which they are being remembered. The historical facts of Holocaust, in this case, include the fact of their eventual transmission' (24). *Maus* (Spiegelman 1991) is the result of eventual transmission of Holocaust, and rather that is why *Maus* starts with not the father's experiences but Artie's. The story begins with little Artie coming to his Dad complaining about the way his friends treated him. Expectation of compassion from the father is overshadowed by father's cynical remark about friends. 'FRIENDS? Your friends?... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week.... Then you could see what it is, Friends!' (5)



Figure 2. *Maus*, p. 5

Every detail of young Artie's childhood is fraught with his father's troubled past. We see the grown Artie in the historical quest of the trauma that besets his past, present and future too rather. His quest for historical truth is his self-quest as well. He tells his father, 'I still want to draw that book about you', to which the father replies 'No one wants any way to hear such stories'. 'I want to hear it' tells Artie. His father doesn't allow Artie to include the stories of his love affairs, but Artie insists to incorporate them, saying, 'But Pop- it's a great material. It makes everything more real—more human. I want to tell your story the way it real happened' (23). Including the little details of his father's life enable Spiegelman to restore a measure of humanity in the characterization of Holocaust victim, who has been until now mythologized and somehow non-existent to the world.

Maus is Spiegelman's psychological quest and accomplishment in blending together public and private history. Hidden or submerged histories are recovered to life so to preserve them before they disappear. To the common masses, history is usually an ambiguous phenomenon, where facts are hard to establish and reality is built on prejudice, misconception and ignorance based on selective perceptions and knowledge. Edward Said connects knowledge with power, and usually history is the story of those who won. Those who have lost are excluded or demonized. History is determined by ones who have political power and who control the means of production. However such a belief renders an ongoing process of history stagnant. History is not static; it lives, breaths and transforms by virtue of close retrospection of intellectuals of any society. Stuart Hall, in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (Hall, 2003) says: 'We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which the conception of the rediscovered, essential identity entails. "Hidden histories" have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important movements of our time' (392). Spiegelman's project of retrieving the 'Hidden histories' of common survivors of Holocaust and Auschwitz is extremely important, since the question that what will happen to the memory of offense when the last survivor is dead is important in itself. Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), *Maus II* (1991) and *Metamaus* (2011), all articulate the urgency and compulsion to remember.

Holocaust Survivors as Subalterns

The feat of remembrance does not get accomplished unless the voice of narrator is heard, read and understood. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term 'Subaltern' (Spivak, 2003: 88), which signifies someone whose voice cannot be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. Thus everything that has a limited or no access to the 'cultural imperialism' is subaltern. Spivak's point is not that the subaltern does not cry out in various ways, but that speaking is a transaction between speaker and listener. Subaltern talk, in other words, does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance. Holocaust survivors have remained more or less Subalterns, since the Holocaust talk has always been subjected to controversial social and political issues. Spiegelman's attempt at talking to his father and writing tiny details of his life is an endeavor at neither speaking for nor to the Holocaust survivor, but with him. Rejecting the art's traditional redemptory aesthetic, religious and political function, which may even be taken as justifying the terror in killer's minds, Spiegelman breaks the silence and writes the indispensable, although his accomplishment keeps agonizing him.



Figure 3. Maus, p. 44

Witek (1989) writes: ‘One powerful school of thought on the holocaust denies the very possibility of any ethically responsible representation of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews. The concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel puts the case most forcefully: “There’s no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor there can be” (97). Adorno echoes the same when he says: ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno 1983, 34). In this view, aestheticizing the Holocaust experience in any literary form is a profound evil. One may acknowledge the insufficiency of art’s circumference in encompassing the gravity of an event so overwhelming in its gravity, however it poses its own paradox as well. The imperative need of human memory to remember the Holocaust does necessitates putting it down in language or any other medium. As Jack Fischel and Sanford Pinsker ask in preface to *Literature, the Arts, and the Holocaust* (1987),

How does a ‘respectful silence’, one that fully recognizes the mystery, the passion, the awesome uniqueness of the Holocaust, differ from the silence of neglect? Silence is silence—nothing more nothing less—and it is silence that may, finally, be the unforgivable crime of those who could have spoken, but who did not, of those who could have joined the post-Holocaust debate, but were afraid. (97)

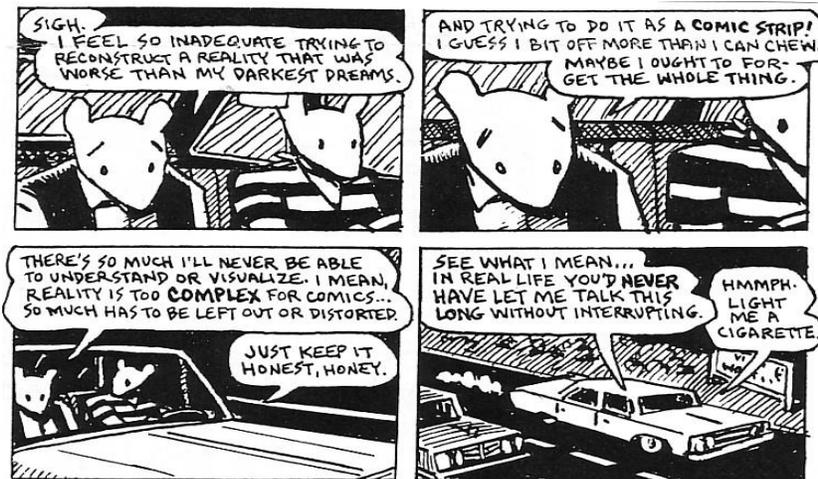
So when silence is not the resort, then it becomes our responsibility to turn to a history of ruptures, fill in the blank spaces and silences and reinterpret the existing history of suffering. Not silence, but remembering is an act that lends coherence and integrity to a history that is compromised by the instances of loss. It’s imperative to those who are living with a history to engage in it as a storyteller or narrator, since narration of a trauma might redress the forcibly forgotten experiences. Certain silences in the narration of history may keep things in morgue temporarily, but over the passage of time their stench will become unbearable, and their recovery will become inevitable.

Spiegelman recovers the unrecorded histories, so to liberate facts from the catacombs of silence through memory. Critics have engaged in the debate if memory can be seen as equivalent

to history. According to some, memory cannot be taken as a factual representation of history, since it does not deal with the same criteria of accuracy, coherence, and analysis which is used to analyze the historical facts, and while recounting memories, there is always a risk of losing or misinterpreting the facts. As Gillian Banner puts it in *Holocaust Literature* (2000):

Memory offers a metaphorical approach to fact; it simultaneously represents fact whilst attempting to understand the fact it represents. It is the medium we employ to remind ourselves who we were, who we have become, who we will be. It vies with and undermines the linearity of conventional history. Whilst the Holocaust does exist in historical fact, it may not be relegated to history; for memory there can be no ‘before’ and ‘after’ the Holocaust; the Holocaust is now. (9)

All Spiegelman had of Holocaust is not his memories, but his father’s. However, for him the phenomenon of ‘Holocaust is now’ became a reality, since he lived with it every moment of his life by the virtue of his parents Holocaust survival. In *Maus* (1986) and *Metamaus* (2011), Spiegelman has never made a claim on representing the facts of history. We can see him worrying about the ‘presumptuousness’ of his work when he says ‘I mean I can’t even make any sense of my relationship with my father... How am I supposed to make any sense of *Auschwitz*?... of the *Holocaust*?’ (Spiegelman 1986: 16). In the last four panels of *Maus II*, Spiegelman directly addresses his frustration and insecurities about imagining and reconstructing Holocaust:



16

Figure 4. *Maus*, p. 16

Maus a Meta-narrative

Maus, also a meta-narrative of Spiegelman’s narration, document clearly his frustrations about his project. Most perturbing for him was whether to represent or not a historical trauma in terms of comic-book form. As Witek (1989: 97) puts it, ‘Serious literature in comic-book form is a relatively recent and slightly unsettling concept in American culture, but a comic book which takes on the Holocaust as a subject compounds the problem of artistic decorum a hundredfold’.

When asked the question ‘Why tell *Maus* in comic form?’ in *MetaMaus* (2011: 165), Spiegelman answers:

What is most interesting about comics for me has to do with the abstraction and structuring that come with the comic page, the fact that memories in time are juxtaposed. In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one doesn’t displace the other the way it happens in films.

Comic mode made certain allowances to Spiegelman to deal with a complex subject. His addressing a topic of historical urgency in a comic medium was a unique blend, which had not happened in past. Comic books in America had hardly ever been used to address real lives and actual events. Their realm remained fantasy and wish fulfilment for a long time, and then with the introduction of Comic Code Authority (1954), and its guidelines to prohibit displaying crime, horror and terror, comic books were forced to depict only ‘either a denatured view of American social reality, or an overtly fantastic never-never land of super powered Manichean fisticuffs’ (Witek 1989: 50). With this scenario, the potential for historical narrative in comic medium almost ended. Success of Spiegelman’s genius in *Maus* in 1987, came as a surprise to many. Through his genre-mixing strategy, Spiegelman resolved the issue of never having been at places where his parents were and never having seen what they had seen. The comic medium made it possible for him to represent an event which has always been deemed as un-representable.:

That Spiegelman employs the medium of the comic-book appears to be at odds with the gravity of the memory that is being conveyed. Yet, the graphic representation of memory is especially appropriate at a time when a significant proportion of the information we receive about our present reality is conveyed through images, photographs and films. By this method the memory of the Holocaust retains its particular and contemporary resonance. (Banner, 2000: 5)

Recent literary theory’s attention to the relation between the verbal and visual medium grants Spiegelman’s work an additional force and dynamism. The relation between word and image on a paper offer a kind of vigor and potency to the idea been expressed. Will Eisner uses the term ‘sequential art’ in *Comics and Sequential Art*, which refers to the cross breeding of word and image, illustration and prose. He talks in that about ‘the unique aesthetics of Sequential Art as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form’ (Eisner 1985: 5). The advantage of using this term *Sequential Art* for the narrative like *Maus*, in which written word intersects with the image drawn, is that it gives the allowance to sidestep the term ‘*comedy*’ that attaches the derogatory connotations like non-seriousness and ridicule to it. The extent to which Spiegelman took his own project of *Maus* seriously is quite evident from the letter he wrote to the Editor of *The New York Times* (1991) after the huge success of *Maus*, in which he objected on *Maus* appearing in the category of Fiction. He writes, “If your list were divided into literature and non-literature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that ‘fiction’ indicates that a work isn’t factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the 13 I devoted to my two volume project if I could’ve only had taken a

novelist's license while searching for a novelistic structure.”

Spiegelman worked arduously to turn a comic mode into a serious thought-provoking genius. The larger and longer segments in comic-book medium allow a story to develop in multifarious length and span. The structural units that are adapted in this mode provided Spiegelman a wider opportunity to increase the length, detail the exposition, intricate the visual and verbal effects and enable the narrative to luxuriously move back and forth in space and time. Instead of leaving everything to the imagination of the audience, the drawings empowered Spiegelman to shape the rationale, pace and sequence of events meticulously, since the narrative's unity is determined visually. This is what Will Eisner calls 'reader discipline' (9) which ensures artist the artistic command to regulate the reader response and perception of storyline to a great extent. Putting in words of Witek, 'Comic strips and comic books finally demand that their readers bring to them differing sets of expectations about the methods, design, and probable effect of each of the two forms of sequential art' (Witek, 1989: 9).

Historical accuracy in *Maus*

Historical accuracy has been an important concern for Spiegelman in *Maus*, and portraying Holocaust through sequential art approximates narrative to reality somehow. Spiegelman has been accused many times for disrespecting the grim reality of Holocaust by depicting it in comic-book medium, but he had some convincing reasons to do this. In *Maus II*, we see Artie worried since for him, 'Reality is too complex for comics' (Spiegelman 1991: 16), but the medium allows him to contain what was uncontainable and represent what was un-representable otherwise. The medium enables the readers to realize that Holocaust was never over for the survivors. Vladek's memories have a strong impact of transporting the reader in the past and live it with him moment by moment. There are quite a few instances where Spiegelman draws him in young and old side by side, are sufficient enough to keep the reader in past and present simultaneously.



Figure 5. Maus, p. 54

Such images facilitate the reader to switch in past and present conveniently.

Drawing what Vladek tells also enables Spiegelman to present different accounts of the same event. For instance while asking Vladek about the prisoners' marching, Artie refers to the orchestra too that played with marching prisoners. But Vladek totally refuses to acknowledge presence of any orchestra, even when Artie insists that it's been very well documented that there was one. Here then Spiegelman depicts the marching prisoners twice, (54) once with the orchestra and other where orchestra isn't quite visible, but we can see it slightly obvious above the heads of marchers, implying Spiegelman's doubt about the presence or absence of orchestra.



Figure 6. Maus, p. 54

Thus partly the reader's credibility of narrative comes from 'viewing' what's happening. The visual medium also lend Spiegelman the ability to draw the diagrammatic representations of

hiding places (Maus I: 86), moving mountains in work camp (Maus I: 56), maps of territory (Maus I: 60), shoemaking (Maus II: 86).



Figure 7. Maus, p. 60

The visual and verbal medium helps Spiegelman to experiment with his narrative and let the reader grasp the details. To put it in words of Banner,

The techniques of comic-book permit Spiegelman to draw the reader's attention to discontinuities and connections which are difficult to render in prose, whilst the flexibility of the format means that the structure can be set aside whenever necessary in order to provide emphasis or to manage material which may not otherwise be easily managed. (Banner 1956: 132)

Spiegelman's representation of Auschwitz for instance is very tricky. The magnitude of illustrating this place has been tackled by exiting the panel, and letting Auschwitz spread beyond the page boundaries, leaving rest to the reader's imagination. (Spiegelman 1991: 157)



Figure 8. Maus, p. 16

Spiegelman expresses his inadequacy about the representation of Auschwitz in *Maus II*, when he tells Francoise that ‘I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!’ (16). He recognizes that part of his this masochist wish comes from his unconscious guilt about having an easier life than his parents. He never felt guilty about his brother’s death and suffering in Holocaust, but he did feel bad about his parents’ agony and distress, because he lived with that. He tells his wife about his nightmares of men coming in his class and dragging the Jewish kids away. Part of the visual depiction of Holocaust comes from Spiegelman’s ability to construct what he had never seen but lived with, giving a structure to what remained a complex mystery for him. ‘There’s so much I’ll be never able to understand or visualize... So much has to be left out or distorted’ (16), Spiegelman tells Francoise.

Reality and fiction Merge

Reality and fiction, private, public and political continue merging in each other as Spiegelman names his first chapter in *Maus II* ‘Mauschwitz’. We see mice lined up to wait their fate. ‘Get undressed! Leave your valuables! Line up!’, ‘They took from us our papers, our clothes and our hair’ (25). Memory throughout *Maus I* and *II* engages in imagination and experience to look into the past and shape personal consciousness. Spiegelman throws light on those dark areas of personal and political history that kept perturbing his equanimity. Vladek’s story becomes the narrative of many who faced this historical trauma.

Vladek’s description of Auschwitz mirrors that of most survivors’ recollections: there are dealings and strategies, his good fortune, the skills which made him valuable and saved his life, the selections, the hanging of the conspirators, the dreams of food. This is the

feature of survivor's stories; the material overlaps, they provide corroboration for one another, whilst each set of memories adds, uniquely, to the overall picture. (Banner 1956, 158)

Rather pertaining to Spiegelman's murky consciousness of that time and space, panels start becoming darker and obscurer after Vladek reaches Auschwitz. The darkness goes with the plight of defenseless and vulnerable prisoners, where 'God didn't come. We were all on our own' (Spiegelman 1986: 29).



Figure 9. Maus, p. 189

In chapter 'Time Flies' in *Maus II*, flies fly, and while Artie recounts the success of *Maus*, there on the floor is a mass mess of skeletal mice corpses.



Figure 10. Maus, p. 41

Reader can perceive that Art is conscious how his success is built on the narrative of personal pain and offense. 'Lately I've been feeling depressed' (41), although *Maus* has been a success and he is going to be a father soon. His guilt, mother's suicide and father's death loom large on the triumph

of his narrative, and death is juxtaposed with achievement, demise with creation. Doom is imminent even in elation and procreation.

‘Throughout *Maus*, Spiegelman’s drawings are spare and almost primitive, with a minimum of line and only sketchily rendered details in the panels’ (Witek 1989: 100). This drawing style suits Spiegelman’s narration of memories of an old man, telling the story of his survival without glossing over it. The dialogue balloons and caption boxes are hand lettered, which has its own practical and aesthetic reasons. It helps establishing a tone of narration and giving a real voice to the narrator effectively in comparison to mechanically produced type. As Witek puts it, ‘The cumulative effect of these devices (the physically superior placement of the verbal elements, the ruled dialogue balloons, enlarged initial letters of the captions) are to establish a tone of stateliness and legitimized power...’ (23). Each chapter in both books start and end with present, and according to Banner (1956), this makes the chapters into something like therapeutic inventions or session with a psychoanalyst during which the survivor, his son and the reader are taken back to the time of pain and difficulty but then are returned back safely. The sequential art technique allow Spiegelman to zoom in and out of scenes, letting the reader have a peep into what the story teller can see. This is especially conspicuous where he depicts Vladek looking through the window of a room at Anja and her family having dinner. (Spiegelman 1986: 74). This panel has a resonance of a frame from film, where audience are literally able to view and analyze the ongoing scenario.

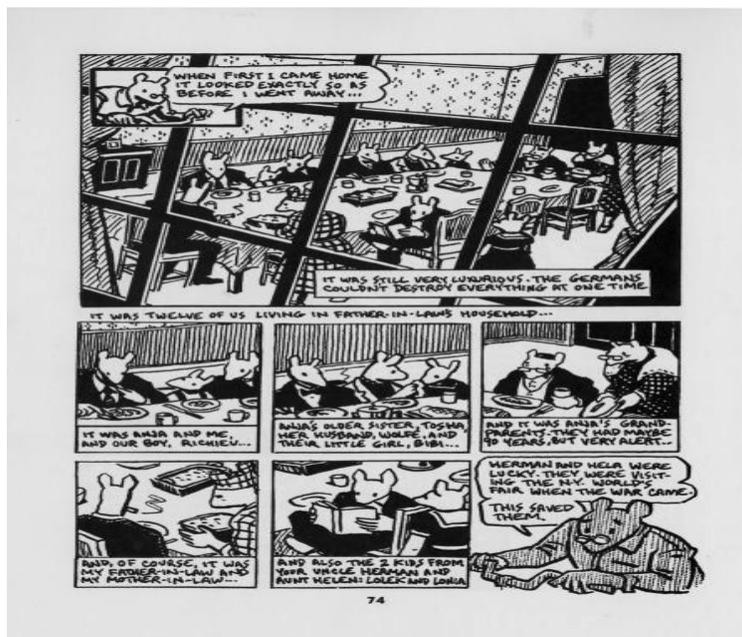


Figure 11. Maus, p. 74

We can see the recurrence of spotlights and searchlights employed in both *Maus I* and *II* by Spiegelman. In *MetaMaus*, when he is asked a question about the significance of spotlights and circles, Spiegelman tells that circular motifs have a privileged role in in his books, since they are

integral to the swastika logo-design¹. Seen in this perspective, when Anja and Vladek are seen dancing in spotlight, they are also then can be seen in the constant shadow of swastika.



Figure 12. Maus, p. 136

According to Spiegelman, circles are always useful for focusing meaning. In *MetaMaus*, he tells about his inspiration of German avant-garde filmmaker, Klaus Wyborny, who experimented shooting certain number of frames every time there was a cut in the original film, ‘so that you would see the whole film synopsized down to be, instead of an hour-long film, a minute-long film’ (Spiegelman 2011, 183). Using this technique gave Spiegelman a privilege to emphasize and inculcate ‘branchings’ wherein the characters move away from that space into different spaces.

In an interview by Joey Cavalieri ‘Jewish Mice, Bubblegum Cards, Comics Art, and Raw Possibilities’ (1981), Spiegelman elaborates on how the stylization of *Maus* enabled him to produce an authentic Holocaust narrative:

If one draws this kind of stuff with people, it comes out wrong. And the way it comes out wrong, first of all, I’ve never lived through anything like that—knock on whatever is around to knock on—and it would be counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that’s actually happening. I don’t know what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few score of photographs and a couple of movies. I’m bound to do something inauthentic.

Also I’m afraid that if I did it with people, it would be very corny. It would come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or ‘Remember the Six Million,’

¹ Spiegelman, Art. 2011. *MetaMaus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

and that wasn't my point exactly, either. To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it's a really much more direct way of dealing with the material. (105-106)

Maus as Funny Animal Genre

Maus is thus unique in the way it uses the funny animal genre to invoke one of the gravest events in history, Holocaust. Using animal figures as Jews and Nazis enable Spiegelman to defamiliarize the Holocaust narrative as it has already been told and retold several times. 'The physical scale in "Maus" nearly approximates the natural relation of mice of mice and cats; the Nazis tower over the much smaller Jews' (Witek 1989: 104). The very choice of mice for Jews and cats for Nazis, who are twice the size of mouse creatures, indicate the power dynamics between the two groups. The Nazi's as cats also suggest the predatory nature of Nazi oppression. Moreover, Spiegelman has given a humanlike disposition to the animals. Except for the faces, the characters are drawn humanlike, which imply as if all of them are putting on masks. This mask like quality of characterization becomes part of the narration when the mice-Jews put on the pig-face masks to disguise as Gentile Poles. The identical faces of the mice and cats are differentiated just by the virtue of their clothing and gestures. The mask becomes entirely obvious in *Maus II*, in the chapter 'Time Flies', making it evident that human characteristics have been abstracted onto animals.



Figure 13. *Maus*, p. 41

Critics have been struggling to know how a Holocaust comic book came to acclaim such a sweeping success and Spiegelman's achievement has been attributed to his powerful representational strategy. Witek (1989) writes that 'There's something almost magical, or at least mysterious, about the effect of a narrative that uses animals instead of human characters. The

animals seem to open a generic space into a pre-civilized innocence in which human behavior is stripped down to a few essential qualities, and irrelevancies drop away...' (112). The key impression throughout this characterization remains 'person', and this is what makes the reader identification with animals effortless and convenient. However, Spiegelman himself recognizes the flaws inherent in the metaphor, and says he didn't want his readers to infer that killing mouse is inherent nature of cats, so there's any justification in what Nazis did to Jews. In *Maus II*, when Artie visits Pavel, a Czech Jew, he tells that Pavel's place is overrun with dogs and cats, and he asks himself, 'Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?' (43) Animals don't have allegorical associations here, they are just a scale to measure Holocaust with an altered vision. In Spiegelman's own words in *MetaMaus*:

When I began work on the long *Maus* my first impulse had me drawing large cats and small mice. By the time I solved the problem to my satisfaction, I'd minimized the disparity so that the cats and mice became, more or less, overt masks. I liked working with a metaphor that didn't work all that well though I certainly didn't want my metaphor to work as an endorsement of Nazi ideology or as an implicit plea for sympathy, like, "Aw, look at the cute defenseless little mouse." (118)

At the end of *Maus II*, Vladek recounts meeting Anja eventually and he tells Spiegelman, 'We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after' (136). On the contrary, *Maus* is a myth buster of the 'happily ever after' myth. Although written in a comic-book medium, there's nothing comic or happy about *Maus*. *Maus* is a multimodal historical narrative of pain and offense that recounts past while living it in the present. James E. Young writes in *At the Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (2000), that 'Some critics like Machel Foucault, have suggested that because every record of history, even the archival, is also a representation of history and thus subject to all of a culture's mediating forces, the study of history can only be the study of commemorative forms' (11).

Conclusion

Maus is a study of history through commemoration. It is not written with didactic ends, neither does it moralize. It is a historical inquiry into the ruptures and discontinuities, into the questions of what happened and how it was passed down to us, and since the history has intervened the present what we have become. Spiegelman writes in *MetaMaus* that 'Memory is a very fugitive thing' (28), and *Maus* is his attempt at not only preserving the personal memory and history, but making it a part of public memory and conversation. In a review of *Maus*, Richard Gehr aptly writes that *Maus* leaps foursquare into "the most difficult ethical problem of the twentieth century." (Gehr, 10), and he does it with sweeping success indeed.

Acknowledgement

The research took place while author was PhD student at University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

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