

Holocaust Representation and Graphical Strangeness in Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale: "Funny Animals," Constellations, and Traumatic Memory

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Abstract. Art Spiegelman's MAUS, a Pulitzer-prize-winning two-volume graphic novel, zooms into wartime Poland, interweaving young Vladek's – the author's father – experiences of World War II and the present day through uncanny visual and verbal representational strategies characteristic of the comics medium. "I'm literally giving a form to my father's words and narrative", Spiegelman remarks on MAUS, "and that form for me has to do with panel size, panel rhythms, and visual structures of the page". The risky artistic strategies and the "strangeness" of its form, to use Harold Bloom's term, are essential to how the author represents the horrors of the Holocaust: by means of anthropomorphic caricatures and stereotypes depicting Germans as cats, Jewish people as mice, Poles as pigs, and so on. Readings of MAUS often focus on the cultural connotations in the context of postmodernism and in the Holocaust literature tradition, diminishing the importance of its hybrid narrative form in portraying honest, even devastating events. Using this idea as a point of departure, along with a theoretical approach to traumatic memory and the oppressed survivor's story, I will cover three main topics: the "bleeding" and re-building of history, in an excruciating obsession to save his father's – a survivor of Auschwitz – story for posterity and to mend their alienating relationship and inability to relate; the connection between past and present, the traumatic subject, and the vulnerability it assumes in drawing and writing about life during the Holocaust as well as the unusual visual and narrative structure of the text. The key element of my study, as I analyse a range of sections of the book, focuses on the profound and astonishing strangeness of the work itself, which consequently assured MAUS a canonical status in the comics' tradition.

Keywords: history, graphic representation, historical constellation, trauma graphic novel, iconic narrative style

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.

Paul Ricoeur

In order to represent himself completely, the son must represent his mother, his other, without omitting a word.

Nancy K. Miller

Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is one of the most prominent graphic novels within the contemporary comic world, and it undoubtedly paved the way for the recognition of the medium as a legitimate art form and as a narrative iconic genre which, until then repudiated as "the exclusive domain of the infantile and the trivial" (Cory, 1995: 37), proved itself equally suitable to address more "serious" and intellectually compelling subject matters. The beginning of the 1970s established a serious documentary approach for comics, not only for the North American underground comix revolution but also globally. The collective trauma of the Vietnam war poured itself into imagistically explicit autobiographical vignettes, such as Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, and later Robert Crumb and many others, inspiring cartoonists to reveal – through text and drawn images – deeply personal and especially touching subject matters. In this cultural context, Art Spiegelman's non-fiction work was the first autobiographical comic that moved from the intensely private first-person narrative towards something approaching documentary status, reconfiguring expectations for the genre and the aesthetic of the comics of the witness. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* has gradually generated a dedicated readership and, while it has since been recognized as a critical success by fellow cartoonists, "arbiters" of culture outside the underground comix scene, and academic scholars, it helped further crystallize a trend which it had been part of: "the cultural perception of what a comic book can be" (Witek, 1989: 96). At the same time, *Maus* introduced an unparalleled sense of iconic sophistication to the traditional Holocaust art and literature. Most importantly, *Maus* has shaped the conception and theory of the (auto)biographical comics and graphic novels, and it became an excellent illustration of the subjective "traumatic truth" and the experimental response to such a devastating event in the development of "trauma culture", within the field of Holocaust Studies and in relation to theories of traumatic memory. The two volumes of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* have been translated into "dozens and dozens" of languages; however, the most significant to Spiegelman remain the ones in French, German, and Polish, the latter remaining perhaps the most controversial

of all (Spiegelman, 2011: 122–125). The work of Art Spiegelman has also been celebrated through exhibitions in museums and art galleries; noteworthy were those in New York: the solo at The Museum of Modern Art in 1991 as part of the museum’s “Projects” series, and the “Art Spiegelman’s Co-Mix: A Retrospective” at the Jewish Museum more than twenty years later. *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize – first ever to be awarded to a graphic novel – in 1992 (Tabachnick, 2012; Smith, 2016; Romero-Jódar, 2017).

In the “Preface and Prelude” to *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, attempting to defend the idea of an apolitical literary canon and to establish aesthetic and ideological criteria involved in the act of canon formation, Harold Bloom writes: “one mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies” (Bloom, 1994: 4; Pullman, 2003). In the study at hand, I employ, as a point of departure, Bloom’s use of the term “strangeness”, deeming it as an accurate description of Spiegelman’s exceptional work, where the unfailing and profound “strangeness” places this Holocaust graphic novel at the forefront of contemporary comics and Shoah narratives canon. In order to analyse the “strangeness” of *Maus* as a concept evolving in time, I will focus on three main topics: the connection between past and present by creating the concept of “Maus” as a constellation, a notion developed by Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History* (1940); the “bleeding” of history and pushing further the limits of the comics medium in representing such a traumatic subject and the vulnerability that comes with drawing and writing about surviving the Holocaust; the infamous trope of “Funny Animals” in Holocaust iconography and the evolution of Spiegelman’s artistic approaches in relation to history, testimony, and memory.

1. A Journey across Panels: From *Maus* (1972) to *MetaMaus* (2011)

Without fully grasping all the implications and problems that would come with devoting himself to such a challenging project, Spiegelman’s first attempt to defy traditional Holocaust representation and render a survivor’s testimony in the form of comics was *Maus*, a three-page story published in the first issue of *Funny Animals*, cartoonist Justin Green’s anthology, in 1972. One year later, *Prisoner of the Hell Planet: a Case History* appeared in *Short Order Comic* No 1, a self-conscious narrative project, much more textured and dealing with the aftermath of his mother’s suicide. If the 1972 comic strip focuses on family history and the “cat and mouse” allegory of oppression, yet not entirely owning it, a fact

suggested by the visual phrasing and the narrative bracketed by a father telling his son a bedtime story, the metaphoric panels of *Prisoner of the Hell Planet* add a lot more nuance to the narrative, offering through the use of photography (of Anja Spiegelman and young Artie) and the expressionist drawing style a sense of verisimilitude and authenticity, which solidifies the comic strip as a true story, “Mom and me, in a summer between tragedies” (2011: 218).

The current version of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* was initially published in *RAW*, the influential avant-garde “graphix” anthology launched in 1980 by Spiegelman and his French-born wife, editor and *New Yorker* art director Françoise Mouly. Consequently, chapters one to six of *Maus*, volume 1, and chapters one to four, volume 2 were originally serialized in a somewhat different form, between 1980 and 1991. Unlike “Prisoner”, which was reproduced in its entirety inside the pages of the final version of the graphic novel, the early panels of *Maus* had been redrawn and retouched between their original publication and the apparition of the collected two volumes, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: and Here My Troubles Began*, in 1986 and 1991 respectively. *The Complete Maus* was released first in CD-ROM format in 1994 and two years later in hardcopy. Finally, in 2011, *MetaMaus: a Look Inside a Modern Classic*, *Maus* was published, a volume containing an in-depth interview with the cartoonist, answering vital questions, such as “Why comics? Why mice? Why the Holocaust?”, conducted by editor Hillary Chute, detailing the creation, technical and artistic decisions as well as the chronology and publication process; pencil sketches, studies, pages from his notebooks, and rejection letters from publishers; a reprint of the 1972 short story, *Maus*; interviews with Spiegelman's wife and children, Nadja and Dashiell; the full transcript of the recordings of the original testimony of his father; and, last but not least, interviews with women who knew Anja in the camps and after. The title of *MetaMaus* is to a certain extent ironic since the two-volume graphic memoir is in itself a *meta*-comic, which is a comic or a graphic novel which takes the comics medium and the process of creating comics as one of its subjects.

From the three-page proto-*Maus* narrative in 1972 to *MetaMaus* (2011) and the present time, Spiegelman's project developed into a huge archive of interconnected texts, documents, testimonies, and aesthetic choices that go beyond the panels of the graphic novel, with a non-linear perception of time reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's new thesis on the concept of history and his idea of historical constellations:

Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the *constellation of a single moment*. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge within the historical moment is always knowledge of

a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment – in the *dialectical image* [author'] – the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory. (2006: 403) [author's emphases]

From the very beginning of *Maus*, as Andrés Romero-Jódar proposes in *The Trauma Graphic Novel* (2017), analysing the first page of *My Father Bleeds History*, Spiegelman creates a visual paragraph that acts as a summary or a “dialectical image” of the entire two-volume graphic novel. These emblematic panels are the elements that come together to create this single moment, simultaneously introducing the reader to the characters and to the elements of the story which create the “dialectical image” of the past historical events and the present conditions under which they are being remembered (Young, 1998: 678; Romero-Jódar, 2017, under *Art Spiegelman's Constellation of Holocaust Textimonies*).

Since the two-page prologue drew attention to the mouse metaphor employed in the creation of this imagetext, which originated in the *Maus* short story, the first page of Chapter One is richer in connections that go back and forth between past memories and the present moment. The black and white style in which the anthropomorphic hybrid characters are drawn is more schematic, the clothing and the gestures do not draw attention from the abstraction of their Jewishness, allowing the multiple levels of the narrative to come forth. The caption above the first panel introduces the self-referential, autobiographical element, “I went out to see my Father in Rego Park” (13), as well as the relationship between father and son, “I hadn't seen him in a long time – we weren't that close”, which continues in the caption of the second panel: “He [Vladek] had aged a lot... his two heart attacks had taken their toll.” There is another event condensed in the second caption – his mother's suicide –, which makes the subject of *Prisoner of the Hell Planet: a Case History* (1973), and it anticipates its inclusion in the novel. We meet Mala, Vladek's new wife, in the fourth panel, and after that we find out that “Mala knew my parents in Poland before the war”. Once again, past and its recollection are condensed in two sentences: the present of his father being remarried and the past of their parents' marriage before the war started as well as them surviving the Holocaust, which is mentioned in the next caption: “She was a survivor too, like most of my parents' friends.” The fact that Mala and his father do not get along might also suggest a tensioned relationship between Vladek and Anja.

Another important aspect that transpires from this opening page of the narrative is Spiegelman's concern for unmediated authenticity through linguistic realism (Romero-Jódar, 2017); from his father's first sentence – “Oi, Artie. You're late. I was worried.” –, he remains faithful to his Vladek's Jewish background, transcribing his testimony verbatim in the speech bubbles as well as in the narrative frame of his past experiences, replicating the accent, the rhythm, and

intonation just right. His broken English marks him as an immigrant: “It’s a shame Françoise also didn’t come”, “A *wire* hanger you give him. I haven’t seen Artie in almost two years. We have plenty *wooden* hangers” [emphasis in the original] and, consequently, “both the drawing and the written text work together to shape these characters as simultaneously human and non-human, American and non-American” (Romero-Jódar, 2017, under *Walter Benjamin and Art Spiegelman: History and Constellations*).

Thus, the opening visual paragraph of *My Father Bleeds History* announces to the reader the major conflicts between the characters as well as Spiegelman’s artistic journey from *Maus* (1972) to *The Complete Maus* (1996), at the end of which he created the historical constellation which *MetaMaus* (2011) is part of. Furthermore, the process of creating *Maus* constantly brings his father’s traumatic past into the present and makes it part of its visual vocabulary: we receive Art’s graphic interpretation of Vladek’s Holocaust narrative. It does not, however, offer any kind of redemptory closure since the traumatic past cannot have any meaning or cathartic quality to it, which runs directly counter to the traditional format of the Holocaust literature (Smith, 2016).

Like Walter Benjamin, Art Spiegelman does not perceive time as a causal progression of events that can illuminate the present; every time it becomes anew: “the present can be fully appreciated exclusively by the actualization of the past in the now, when all events pile up together, instead of in a (chrono)logical succession. All the experiences that have ever been gathered simultaneously in the now when the angel of history blankly stares at humanity” (Romero-Jódar, 2017, under *Walter Benjamin and Art Spiegelman: History and Constellations*). The gathering of past experiences, of all that “has been”, gives shape to another poignant image of a constellation, in Chapter Two: *And Here My Troubles Began* – “Auschwitz (Time Flies)”. The events, past and present, are inextricably connected in another visual paragraph: Spiegelman’s comics self is wearing a mouse mask while sitting at his desk smoking and working on what might be a *Maus* panel. He’s gradually facing his readers as the speech bubbles gather these random traumatic past events: “Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944... I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.” “In May Françoise and I are expecting a baby... Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944, over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz.” “In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of MAUS was published. It was a critical and commercial success. (...) In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note)” (2003: 201). In the last panel, taking over the bottom half of the page, the present is stated: “Lately I’ve been feeling depressed”, while standing over a pile of mice bodies, whereas outside the window we can see clearly the wired fence and a watchtower dominating the concentration camp. This is an incredibly powerful panel, which proves that the “strangeness” of the comics

medium allows through visual narrative for more evocative “constellations of a single moment.”

2. A Survivor's Tale: “Received History” and Postmemory

Maus, the title Spiegelman had chosen for the project – since the publication of the first three-page version of his survivor's story – illustrated his then search for a more visceral imagery of anti-Semitic propaganda, “the Nazis chasing Jews as they had in my childhood nightmares” (2011: 114), not fully aware that there were reverberations and precursors of this type of dehumanizing representation of the Jewish people as pests. The phonation of “Maus” does sound like the English word “mouse”, but using the German equivalent, and thus the language of the cats reinforced by the epitaph quoting Hitler: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” (2003: 10), validates the interplay between the visual sign system and the aural codes that structure *Maus* as an imagetext or, to use Spiegelman's preferred term, “commix”, the commixture of word and image. There are visual “rhymes” that reinforce this association: the recurring Nazi command “Juden Raus!” in the first volume and the first three letters of “Auschwitz”, a trope of the Holocaust, which in the second volume – when referring to the camps – becomes “Mauschwitz” (Hirsch, 2011: 25).

Correspondingly, the subtitle “A Survivor's Tale” clearly suggests that Spiegelman did not set out to capture the genocide of six million people, and, although the singular “a survivor” alludes by omission to the numerous survivors of the Holocaust, it emphasizes not only the survival of Vladek Spiegelman but of Art himself as someone who survives the deaths of their parents. Marianne Hirsch goes further in depth with the analysis of the subtitle and the choice of the word “tail” as well as the use of the name without capitals by writing:

...the subtitle of Volume I plays with the visual and aural dimensions of the word “tale” – when we see it we know it means “story,” but when we hear it after hearing “mouse” we may think that it is spelled t-a-i-l. Furthermore, on the cover and title imprint, the author includes his own name without capitals, thereby making himself a visual construct able to bring out the tensions between aesthetic and documentary, figural and mimetic: “art,” on the one hand, and “Spiegelman” or “mirror-man,” on the other. (2011: 26)

As James E. Young (1998) points out, Art Spiegelman does not attempt to represent “events he never knew immediately but instead portrays his necessary hypermediated experience of the memory of events. This postwar generation, after all, cannot remember the Holocaust as it actually occurred” (p. 669). In actual fact, the three-page *Maus* story was based on “what I knew before I knew anything; one of those free-floating shards of an anecdote I’d picked up” (2011: 22). The later *Maus* is closely based on the dialogues between Spiegelman and his father, Vladek, which contain most of the story: “the essence of it was really this one set of conversations that took place in ’72” and later on, for more details and facets, or simply a way to spend time with his father, “back in ’77 or even a little bit before, [when] I began to make forays to see him, taping him again and again almost until he died in ’82” (2011: 23, 24).

The “tale”, however, is not at all a single story but two stories, past and present, told simultaneously: his father’s survival story and Art’s exercising his visual imagination, his father’s testimony of the Holocaust and what happens in Art’s mind, thus breaching the gap between “how what happened is made sense of by father and son in the telling” (Young, 1998: 676).

Those who are born after the mass killing ceased can understand, in an academic sense, certain empirical details – chronology, numbers, place names, maps, and the industrial processes and bureaucracy that facilitated the killing – but the essential horror of genocide remains beyond understanding. (Smith, 2016: under *Selling out and Talking in Screams*)

And like any good postmodern artistic act, *Maus* feeds on itself, recalling its own production, even the choices the artist makes along the way. This is where the autobiographical history of the “survivor’s tale” begins, as Young indicates: “neither the three-page 1972 version of ‘Maus,’ nor the later, two-volume *Maus* opens in the father’s boyhood Poland; but rather, both open with the son’s boyhood in Rego Park, Queens” (678). In the beginning of *Maus I*, Artie seems to be on a mission, a historical quest as well as a quest for understanding his own life dominated and shaped by memories which are not his own: “I still want to draw that book... The one I used to talk to you about... About your life in Poland, and the war”, symbolizing the “received history”, “a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us” (Young, 1998: 669) or “postmemory” (Hirsch, 2001) pertaining to the second generation survivor and biographer: “I want to hear it.” (2003: 14). However, Artie does not ask his father to start telling him about the war, the deportation, or about their imprisonment in the concentration camps, but rather asks him to start with his mother, Anja: “Tell me how you met” (14), meaning to start with *his* origins

(Young, 1998: 678–679), proving his major role in this telling of his father’s story. As Vladek’s story is based on his subjective, selective, and distorted memory in terms of chronology, events, and places and since remembering the past might be a difficult task in the life of a survivor, he starts with his life before Anja and before the war. This is but one of the examples that represent the challenging task of ordering a comics narrative in frames based on a testimony.

Maus II opens with Vladek and Anja inside the concentration camp – though separated –, where “they took from us our names. And here they put me my number” (2003: 186), it ends with their reunion and jumps through time, to the final drawing, that of the tombstone of Spiegelman’s parents’ grave, offering:

... a visual final full stop to the narrative. Their names, with their dates of birth and death, appear under the bigger name of the family, Spiegelman, written in capitals and under the Star of David. Their Jewishness, their family, and their own stories are all integrated in the symbolic drawing of the tombstone. Nonetheless, after these capitalized letters, the fourth and last ending of the graphic novel is added: Art Spiegelman’s signature and dates for the creation of the complete text: 1978–1991. (Romero-Jódar, 2017, under *Act II: A MAUSoleum of Testimonies*)

It is not an ending in the sense of a traditional narrative structure since Spiegelman resists the possibility of fully accepting or understanding the terrible implications of the Holocaust with one single panel, just above the drawing of his parents’ tombstone: his dying father addresses his son, Artie, with the name of his phantom brother, Richieu, who died in the Holocaust, asking him to put the tape recorder away, “I’m *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now...” (2003: 296). There is still unresolved, “unassimilated trauma”, Young contends citing Saul Friedlander’s concept of “deep memory” as a tragic event which remains inarticulable, unrepresentable, the implication remaining that for a second generation such deep memory will always remain elusive, lost in a history which cannot be fully grasped: “I only found out later that I’d totally misspelled his name, but I’m glad I did. I thought of it as some kind of Frenchified version of Richards, but actually in Polish it’s R-y-s-i-o, and I had never seen it written down until well into the process” (2011: 18).

3. “Funny Animals”: Trauma and Visual Metaphors

Iconic narratives manage to create some kind of spell, Art Spiegelman seems to suggest, since photographs, in some cases, “tend to have too much information; it’s very hard to suppress the unnecessary. The work that actually works best

deploys information visually to give you the necessary signs and not too much more” (2011: 168). In depicting the Holocaust in the form of comics, through the use of the “Funny Animals” trope, Spiegelman proposes his alternative to the representation crisis in Shoah art and literature: “I’m literally giving a form to my father’s words and narrative, and that form for me has to do with panel size, panel rhythm, and visual structures of the page” (qtd in Chute, 2009: 341). Equally, the recourse to the animal allegory, in the case of *Maus*, represents the vision of an individual who spent his childhood watching American cartoons and reading American World War II comics, where Japanese soldiers were demonized as creatures with fangs. His knowledge of the animated cartoon lexicon and the kingdom of funny animals comics proved useful when deciding on the representation of French as frogs, Americans as dogs, and Poles as pigs: “In my bestiary, pigs on a farm are used for meat. (...) my metaphor was somehow able to hold that particular vantage point while still somehow acknowledging my father’s dubious opinion of Poles as a group” (2011: 122).

In “Mauschwitz”, Chapter One of the second volume, *And Here My Troubles Began*, Art “the artist” is shown in the present working on the details of *Maus*, specifically the autobiographical aspects of the story. In this metatextual vignette, we understand his dilemma: trying to figure out how to draw his wife, Françoise, who is French. Right under the caption setting the time and place, “Summer vacation. Françoise and I were staying with friends in Vermont...”, there is a page from one of his sketchbooks depicting Françoise wearing different animal heads (moose, dog, frog, rabbit, and mouse). “What kind of *animals* should I make you?” – Artie asks. “Huh? A *mouse*, of course!” – Françoise retorts. This cannot work: “But you’re *French!*” (2003: 171). This exchange suggests that drawing characters as animals was not an easy task for Spiegelman. In this particular case, he compromises, combining Françoise’s French origins in her physical aspect; her style reminds the reader of the 60s French fashion, while wearing a mouse head, as she is morally Jewish: “... if you’re a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I *converted*, didn’t I?” Her anthropomorphic form is therefore not a given, and his choice to portray his French wife as a mouse is almost comically played out in this visual paragraph, and, as Smith writes in *Reading Art Spiegelman* (2016), it draws attention to “the problematic question of choosing or being forced to adopt one’s animal classification represents a second knowingly problematic aspect of the metaphor”. We understand the implications that go beyond this episode: how challenging for an author is to step into the world of Holocaust literature and to make all the right artistic decisions in the process of creating his own interpretation of what happened to his parents during the war.

Certainly, drawing *Maus* (1972) was less complicated since he was merely focusing on the cat-mouse visual metaphor of class and racial oppression, using his parents’ history as well as his own: “The cats and mice just came as a set,

part of all the Tom and Jerry comics and cartoons that I grew up with” (2011: 118). What is most interesting about his first attempt at the “Funny Animals” trope is that “I managed to almost totally deracinate it. The references to the Jews are as *die Mause*n. The references to the Nazis are as *die Katzen*. The factory that my father works in, in the ghetto, is not presented as a shoe factory, but as a kitty litter factory” (Id.: 118). Dehumanizing the characters of this story through the animal metaphor both allows and denies the possibility to engage with a Holocaust narrative and to fully comprehend the scale of such atrocities: “the idea of Jews as toxic, as disease, as dangerous subhuman creatures, was a necessary prerequisite for killing my family” (2011: 115).

The pile of dozens of nameless dead mice under Art’s comic self-wearing a mouse mask is the perfect example of de-familiarization of the “Funny Animals” trope, reminding the reader that the classification of Maus into the anthropomorphic animal genre is complicated by the fact that a Shoah testimony (Vladek’s testimony and the original text of the graphic novel) is visually translated into an animal metaphor while, at the same time, being brought into question by self-referential elements and metatextual comments: when being interviewed about his project by a film crew who are also wearing dog masks, Artie starts to shrink on his desk chair to child-like proportions, screaming “I want... ABSOLUTION. No... No... I want... I want my MOMMY!” (2003: 202), he explains that “Sometimes I just don’t feel like an adult” (Id.: 203), and goes on to visit his therapist, Pavel, walking on a pile of bodies that seem to be following around. Once in Pavel’s office, a survivor of Terezin and Auschwitz as well, who “sees patients at night”, he indicates that the “place is overrun with stray dogs and cats. Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?”, then adds, for comic relief: “Framed photo of a pet cat. Really!” The real reason of de-familiarizing his reader with the “Funny Animals” trope, by the revealing of the mechanism of his visual metaphor and by calling attention to his artifice – as Romero-Jódar (2017) aptly remarks in “‘Funny Animals’: (De)Familiarisation in *Maus*” – is Artie’s sense of his own unsuitability as a spokesperson for Holocaust survivors and their traumatic experience: “Some part of me doesn’t want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can’t visualize it clearly, and I can’t BEGIN to imagine what it felt like” (2003: 206).

By layering the biographical and autobiographical within the visual narrative, Spiegelman delineates between Vladek’s story and his artistic interpretation of his father’s testimony, and, at the same time, “he prevents complete and uncomplicated empathy through his allegory’s constant insistence on its own artificiality. The concord offered by the cartoon language is denied and undercut” (Romero-Jódar, 2017). He allows the reader to identify with the characters through the Icon and the allusion to Disney, Mickey Mouse and other animals with human characteristics, while simultaneously questioning the Icon as a means to represent

a Holocaust survivor's story and silently condemning Disney's contribution to a morally repugnant racial worldview. Oblivious to the connection between Disney and Nazi propaganda, Vladek unwittingly wishes his son would become "*famous*, like... what's-his-name? (...) You know... The big-shot cartoonist..." (Spiegelman, 2003: 135).

As a result, by acknowledging the artificiality of the "Funny Animals" trope, Spiegelman reinterprets and heightens the commonly low status of the comics medium into a form that is highly expressive, multi-faceted, critical, and psychologically layered (Young, 1998: 675). The allegoric imagery thus becomes secondary to the relationship between the characters and the mechanisms of memory.

4. The Strangeness of Immortalizing Traumatic Memory in Commix: a Conclusion

The use of the comics medium in immortalizing the traumatic memories of a Shoah survivor proves that "the strength of commix lies in [its] ability to approximate a 'mental language' that is closer to human thought than either word or picture alone" (Young, 1998: 672). The narrative iconic genre allowed Spiegelman to both acknowledge and challenge the dominant tropes of Holocaust representation. The originality of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* also derives from Spiegelman not following the standard memorial narrative of the Holocaust, presuming a "paradigm for history itself, a conception of past historical events that includes the present conditions under which they are being remembered" (Young, 1998: 678). This "strange" historical constellation stems from the constant dialogue between past and present, between father and son, as first- and second-generation survivors, from the juxtaposition of Vladek's erratic manner of narrating his history, to Art's insistence in preserving the authenticity of the account, even as he created its visual metaphor and its narrative coherence. Traumatic memory plays a major role in *Maus* because it goes beyond official historical facts, which – albeit "objective" – might be misinterpreted or, worse, forgotten.

Maus: A Survivor's Tale relies heavily on hand-drawn maps, sketches, and portraits as well as notes, letters, diaries, and birthday cards produced by the inmates incarcerated at Auschwitz–Birkenau and most camps detailing daily life aspects from the prisoners' point of view; in addition to cartoony pamphlets, booklets, and other aesthetically and politically charged cultural artefacts commissioned by Jewish organizations in the immediate post-war era. There are numerous reports from second-generation survivors of their experience with seeing images of the Holocaust atrocities for the first time – for example, Susan

Sontag's famous account in the opening pages of *On Photography*: "Nothing I have ever seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about" (2008: 20). For Spiegelman, on the other hand, the most impactful objects which he encountered were not the photographic images but the hand-drawn ones. That is why he chose to translate Margaret Bourke-White's famous survivors-at-the-wire photograph, which he framed in the *Maus* comic strip (1972), into comic format.

The creation of the *Maus* constellation meant constantly selecting, ordering, and preserving an eyewitness's testimony, making sense of the past, while – in the present, as a secondary witness – holding together this strange tension between the pictorial codes (photographic and drawn images) and the textual (the oral history, as Art tape-records Vladek's story, and the written). Moreover, the commixture of drawings, photographs, and text enables a multi-layered narrative with various levels of meaning and readings, interconnected through simultaneous movements between word, image, and the visual metaphor they create (Kohli, 2012). Nevertheless, the formal complexities of the graphic novel are without a doubt the most remarkable, and all the artistic and philosophical nuances that constitute *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* would later become the propellant for younger generations not only to produce but also to experiment with the autobiographical commix strip.

The ultimate question, however, is not how effectively *Maus* recreates a Holocaust survivor's testimony, taking into consideration the insufficiency of memory as evidence, the process of remembering, and the dangers of forgetting, but whether the graphic narrative and the deceptively simple visual metaphors diminish the catastrophic magnitude of the events depicted or, more importantly, whether below its visual surface it dehumanizes its victims, moving the focus from *what* is being represented to *how* its creator does that. I would conclude that Spiegelman was indeed after more than recounting a survivor's tale or constructing a more comprehensible (auto)biographical account of his conversations with his father, and that his persistent experimentation with the commix strip form and consequently the metanarrative aspects of his work are there to prove that the creation of *Maus* is insistently made observable. We recognize Spiegelman's creative process and how it materializes Vladek's voice, his father's personal experiences of the war atrocities reconstructed and documented by his post-Holocaust child, serialized in print, and archived into the public record.

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