

HISTORY AND TRAUMA IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *MAUS*, BY ART SPIEGELMAN

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Abstract: *This paper deals with Art Spiegelman's graphic novel Maus, a visual depository of personal histories. The research is aimed at investigating the way in which the narrative layers are kept together by the multimodal expressiveness of comic strips. The concept of graphic novel is analyzed against the traditional label of comic book and the need for a new nomenclature of the genre is discussed together with the rise to fame of the novel Maus. Art Spiegelman uses zoomorphic characters to stand for real beings in his father's story of the Holocaust. Placed at the meeting point between comic studies and fictional (auto)biography, the novel becomes a form of witnessing history, while, at the same time, challenging the authenticity of any memory. The paper also focuses on the way in which the traditional panel-to-panel comics form gives the reader the opportunity to contribute to the meaning production.*

Keywords: *graphic novel, collective autobiography, Maus, panel border.*

This paper sets out to analyze the way in which comics function as a medium for memory, as text and image are used to create a fictional (auto)biography. The analysis will tackle the concepts of multimodality and multimodal texts as starting points to the investigation of the narrower genre of comics, represented in the present study by Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*. The novel brings together representations of the Holocaust horrific experiences that Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek, recollects, at his son's request, and the artist's attempts to cope with the effect of his parents' traumatic experiences on his own life. More personal histories intertwine in the novel, projected visually and verbally on the larger historical context of the Holocaust.

The way in which images and language interact to create meaning has long been the scientific interest of researchers in multimodality. According to some theorists, "a text can be defined as multimodal when it combines two or more semiotic systems" (Anstey and Bull, cited in Dicerto, 2018: 16). Sarah Discerto, however, identifies more than one semiotic system in the language-based monomodal text, in which "systems other than language are ancillary to language itself and cannot be independent of it: typography or

paralinguistic features cannot exist without language” (Discerto, 2018: 17). In a multimodal text, on the other hand, the two (or more) different semiotic systems do not depend on each other to create meaning, although they are in a relationship of complementarity in order to create a cohesive unit. That is why Sarah Discerto redefines a text as multimodal “when it combines at least two semiotic systems that are not necessarily ancillary to one another” (Discerto, 2018: 17). We will rely on this definition to categorize Art Spiegelman’s text as multimodal, with the observation that further analysis will show that at times, one of the two systems will outweigh the other in the unfolding of the narrative. In comics and graphic novels, the inextricable link between their multimodal or polysemiotic components, text, image and other semiotic systems, is more apparent than in the case of other multimodal text. As Gardner notes, “comics chronicle the twilight world, the liminal space between past and present, text and image, creator and reader. The comics frame is necessarily a space where these binaries overlap, collaborate and compete for attention and meaning” (Gardner, 2012: 176).

Although for some critics the main difference between traditional comic books and graphic novels mainly resides in their length and in the fact that they have or have not been previously published in episodic format, Baetens and Frey (2015: 18-22) discuss the difficulty to pinpoint an unequivocal definition for a genre that is in perpetual change. Whether, as far as form is concerned, it comes as a radical reformation of the comic book, or if it preserves the traditional layout of the comics page, as is the case of *Maus*, according to Baetens and Frey, in terms of content, the graphic novel exploits the autobiographical potential for text-image work established by underground comics and shows a propensity for historical narrative. Other perspectives reveal a migration of other genres towards the graphic novel: “the autobiographical as well as the heterobiographical genre has been successfully transferred into graphic storytelling, often connected with representations of historical situations and events” (Schmitz-Emans, 2013: 393).

Gardner considers that

“the comic, because of the unique way in which it brings together different signs (figural, textual, symbolic) into a crowded field where meaning is both collaborative and competitive (among different semiotic systems, between frames, between reader and writer) emerged as a preeminent form for those interested in developing and interrogating theories and methods of reading the everyday world”. (2012: 177)

He finds an important interconnectedness between the emergence of the contemporary graphic novel as a genre and the rise of the personal computer. The development of technology has fuelled debates on cultural representations and narrative archives and on the need for new media texts. The increasing popularity of comics and graphic novels is, therefore, highly indebted to this propitious moment. According to Johanna Drucker, “graphic novels are uniquely contemporary phenomena for reasons that combine technological opportunity and cultural disposition” (2008: 39). Art Spiegelman’s two volume graphic novel published in 1986 and in 1992, respectively, came to legitimize a medium that, until that moment, had been peripheral or, in McCloud’s words, had been considered “semiliterate, cheap, disposable”. As McCloud notes in his seminal work on comics, written itself in the form of a comics book, “as I write this, in 1992, American audiences are just beginning to realize that a simple style doesn’t necessitate a simple story” (McCloud, 1994: 49). McCloud’s words are written as a caption in the same panel with, and

just above, an image showing the front cover of *Maus*. The turn in the “cultural disposition” has to do with the changing attitude towards sequential art and its rich potential of meaning production.

The simple style refers, in the case of our object of analysis, to the seemingly uncomplicated graphics of *Maus*, the framework of which is, according to researchers of the novel, “deceptively simple” (Geis: 1; Drucker: 46). Spiegelman draws Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Poles as pigs and the graphic narrative is organised in panel-by-panel sequences, put together in a “mechanism of small but meaningful variations on a basic pattern [that] is followed throughout the whole work” (Baetens & Frey, 2015: 112). However, the story is not linear and the Johanna Drucker identifies three narrative layers: “an embedded narrative (the story told to Spiegelman by his father), a frame narrative (Spiegelman describing and commenting on the story), and a discursive frame within which the narrative unfolds (the work as a whole)” (Drucker: 46). More than that, the first volume starts with Art’s recollection of a painful childhood memory, his father’s bitter comment on friendship and survival, and this short prologue casts doubt on who the real protagonist of the survivor’s tale is. As it is gradually revealed, *Maus* is a collective autobiography, the general frame accommodating at least three tales: Vladek’s, Artie’s and the psychologist’s. Artie also acts as the extradiegetic verbal narrator, inside square borders, in the most part of the novel, and as the intradiegetic narrator in the chapter *Auschwitz (Time flies)* of the second volume but he is also the extra- and the intradiegetic visual narrator/drawer of the story. A heavy amount of subjectivity lingers over and transgresses the narrative world. However, the artist has been recognised and appreciated for the unparalleled approach to narrative voice and time frame. As Jared Gardner points out,

“He simultaneously validates his father’s memories and firsthand experience as authentic even as he recounts the costs and the fictions—for both father and son—required to record those memories. Simultaneously, Spiegelman manages to challenge the authenticity of any memory even as he insists on the vital truth of the story Vladek tells, and which he recounts” (2012: 138).

The chapter *Auschwitz (Time flies)* has significant importance, in this respect, for the development of the narrative. Baetens comments upon the advantage of confronting the reader of graphic novels with drawn characters that can be seen, that are different from the narrative elements of traditional novels that only behave at cognitive level. He considers that “the overwhelming presence of protagonists’ bodies” is in tune with contemporary thought and presents *Maus* as a complex example since its use of drawings of animals for people achieves a wonderful ambiguity: it is autobiography, but it is a distanced and muted approach because of the metaphor (Baetens & Frey, 2015: 175). On the other hand, trying to explain children’s fascination with cartoons, Scott McCloud touches on the ‘universal identification simplicity’ (36) that is related to our ability to extend our identities to inanimate objects or, we might add, to animals. The need to make the reader “become the silent accomplice” in the meaning production and to more readily identify with the protagonists, may add to what prompted Spiegelman to choose mice for Jews, an allusion to the Nazi’s identifying Jews as vermin, or the cat-mouse ancient antagonism when he chose to portray the Nazi perpetrators as cats. In the chapter *Auschwitz (Time flies)*, however, the time frame breaks and the past merges into the present. Vladek is dead and Artie has to face the public reactions at the publication of the first volume of *Maus* and

many other personal traumas. The chapter is highly self-reflexive and metanarrative. Anthropomorphic characters wearing masks replace the “real” protagonists of the other chapters. A shrinking Artie, reduced to childlike stature by his own fears and by the aggressive group of critical readers, wears a mouse mask, with diagonal hatching and so does the psychiatrist. The journalist shouting against the portrayal of the (Nazi) Germans as cats and questioning the guilt that descendants of the Holocaust perpetrators should feel wears a cat mask, while the advocate of Israeli Jews, appalled by the choice of mice for Jewish characters wears a white mouse mask. The artist’s present is drawn as an artificial world that mimics the past, in which some of the past atrocities are re-enacted, as Artie’s desk is placed on a pile of mice corpses. At the same time, self-irony comes to remind the readers they are in a fictional world, when Artie wonders if the presence of “real” stray dogs and cats that overrun the psychiatrist’s house might spoil his metaphor. The intense self-reflexivity of the novel and its simultaneous “claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, 1988) can place it under the label of historiographic metafiction.

According to David Mikics, “the crucial issue of Spiegelman’s career is the interference and connection between historical concern and autobiographical interiority” (Mikics, 2012: 19). This rings true in *Maus*, where the present and the past are inextricably united, in a peculiar synchronicity. The use of comics form annihilates the border between individual and collective memory. Panel borders are skilfully used in this respect, Spiegelman choosing to stick to the traditional comic form. The miracle happens in the gutter, between the panels, where the readers can use all their other senses to decode what is, in fact, “an exclusively visual representation” (McCloud, 89). According to McCloud, “comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments, but closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality” (67). In *Maus*, however, the readers’ own mindsets and attitudes to history and past are put into question, from the very beginning, at the conception of a story about the Holocaust in comics form. It is precisely this form that allowed the author to narrate and draw the ugly truth in a “more sensitive and ethically appropriate mode of historical representation” (Baeten & Frey, 2015: 82). That is why, according to Baeten and Frey, people’s current representation of Holocaust is more closely linked to *Maus* than to Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*.

Whereas “the visual logic of the graphic novel is often less syntagmatic than paradigmatic” (Baeten & Frey, 2015: 82), *Maus* does not offer the cathartic experience the journalists in chapter *Auschwitz* (*Time flies*) hound the weeping Artie about. Gardner, in fact, claims the opposite:

“In place of ideals of freedom from or ownership of the past, *Maus* offers the seemingly meager recompense of a full accounting of all the obstacles that stand in the way of healing and recovery: lost diaries, lost mothers, conflicting testimony” (Gardner, 2012: 138).

Leaving unanswered questions in what concerns the subject matter, *Maus* provides more solid ground for the new label, *graphic novel*. Baetens and Frey (2015) argue that the debate on the opportunity of a nomenclature change has helped the graphic novel gain cultural prestige, convincing contemporary media that the graphic novel is worthy of attention. Gardner considers Spiegelman’s contribution most influential to the reception and acceptance of the new form of expression, due to his unparalleled approach to collective autobiography:

“it is hard to overstate the significance of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in lending cultural legitimacy to this gutter form, from its Pulitzer prize in 1992 to the dozens of critical essays that have secured a place for comics studies within the halls of academia (Gardner, 2012: 137).

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