

The Holocaust in Pictures: *Maus* and the Narrative of the Graphic Novel

Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English

No. 2, 54-59

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<http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/lev>

DOI: 10.7146/lev.v0i2.104696

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Literature in English 1: Form and Genre



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the effect of comic conventions and the depiction of characters as anthropomorphic animals in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, a pivotal piece depicting the Holocaust and its impact on the survivors and their children. The article will claim that instead of the graphic medium being a hindrance, Spiegelman uses the comic conventions to his advantage, allowing the reader to identify with the characters and narrative in a unique way. In this way the graphic narrative underlines the verbal, demonstrating that the medium of the comic and graphic novel is not purely preserved for fiction or child narratives.

Keywords: Art Spiegelman; graphic novels; Holocaust; anthropomorphic animals; comic conventions; iconic characters; identification; Literature in English 1: Form and Genre

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Introduction

Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* is a piece of literature that, from the time it was published, tested the limits of the medium of graphic novels and depictions of the Holocaust. It is the story of Spiegelman's own father Vladek Spiegelman's struggles as a Jew during the Second World War as he survived several concentration camps, including Auschwitz, as well as his life before and after the war. This includes his relationship with Artie¹, his second wife Mala and his troubles with coming to terms with the experiences of the war. Moreover, the book is the story of Spiegelman himself as the son of two Holocaust survivors including the obstacles he met when making *Maus*. The unconventional aspect of the novel is that the accounts of the war, Vladek's post war life, and Artie's present, before he publishes the book, are all interwoven, making it a rare mix of different decades showing cause and effect. "The struggle to transform history and testimony into art is thus a central part of the drama of the text, and the reader is constantly sucked into the maelstrom of the conflict" (Langer). In the graphic novel *Maus*, Jews and Germans are depicted as iconic anthropomorphic mice and cats. However, instead of this ending up being tacky and childish, *Maus* is a powerful and successful narrative of the Holocaust changing the field of graphic novels for good. But how can this be? What is the reason for this novel becoming so successful and changing the game in the field of graphic novels as well as Holocaust narratives?

The Holocaust in Pictures

One of the unique aspects of the novel is the narrator(s), as it is unclear who the main narrator in the novel is; whether it is the first-person narrator Vladek or the more omniscient narrator Artie. On one hand, it could be argued that they both play an equal part in the novel, thereby being joint narrators. On the other hand, even though it is Vladek's story of the Holocaust that all events in the novel evolves around, the reader only knows what Artie knows, arguing that the main narrator is Artie. In this way the novel is almost exclusively written in a first-person narrative and through dialogue between the characters, the exceptions being when Artie speaks directly to the reader itself (201). Additionally, it is important to note that Vladek's stories are processed by Spiegelman through the filter of his imagination by drawing pictures to the spoken word, as well as choosing what parts of Vladek's stories to put in the book. The trouble with this, especially concerning a biographical piece as *Maus*, is processing the tales while staying true to the facts and his father's memories. Spiegelman himself addresses this problem unconventionally in a meta² conversation between Artie and Françoise as he expresses the difficulty of writing and drawing the novel as he feels:

¹ "Artie" is Spiegelman's persona in the novel. To distinguish between the author and the character in the novel, this paper will refer to the character as Artie, and the author as Art Spiegelman. Sometimes the line between one and the other will be so fine that Spiegelman will be used instead of Artie.

² Artie reflects upon and refers to the authorship of the novel he himself is a part of.

“Inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. [...] There’s so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too complex for comics... so much has to be left out or distorted.”

“Just keep it honest, honey.”

“See what I mean... in real life you’d never have let me talk this long without interrupting.” (Spiegelman 176)

In this quote, Artie addresses his own difficulties as the son of two Holocaust survivors as he will never be able to imagine the perils his parents have gone through. Consequently, Artie and Vladek’s relationship becomes strained as Artie is not fully able to relate to his father, and Vladek keeps him at some distance feeling that Artie cannot understand him or his behavior in certain situations. This is evident in the case of Artie not understanding why Vladek keeps “tons of worthless shit” (161), whilst burning his mother Anja’s diaries, as well as an event in the camps where Vladek explains himself with: “about Auschwitz, nobody can understand” (224), disabling any further inquiries.

Furthermore, in the quote above, Artie addresses the perplexity of narrating the Holocaust in the form of comics – as he says: “it is too complex for comics” (176). Moreover, he expresses the difficulty of staying true to the narrative, as mentioned above, and humorously tells the reader that alterations have been made throughout. In this way the reader will have to rely on Spiegelman to tell the tale in honesty. As Thomas Doherty puts it in his article “Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust”: “Spiegelman’s fidelity to the unvarnished truth is apparent in his unsparing portrait of Artie as a (sometimes) petulant son and his father as a (usually) insufferable human being” (81).

However, although *Maus* stays true to the facts and Artie tells the “unvarnished truth”, the very medium of the narrative can make it problematic to identify *Maus* as a non-fiction text as would be the case if it was written as a traditional prose novel. One example includes *Maus* being placed on The New York Times’ best-seller list for fiction literature, which Spiegelman protested against whereupon it was moved to the non-fiction bestseller list (Chute 457). This might also be due to the fact that the characters are not human but anthropomorphic animals – animals given human features and abilities; portraying the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, the Poles as pigs and the Americans as dogs, as well as brief encounters with Swedish deer and a French frog (Spiegelman 14, 30, 35, 253, 272, 285). The metaphoric effect is eminent – the reader quickly understands the stereotypical idea of the mice being chased by the predatory cats, as well as the rivalry between the cats and dogs. The mice are also a nudge to Nazi propaganda which sometimes depicted the Jews as “vermin” rats or mice (Doherty 74).

Furthermore, the different animal identities are used as masks in parts of the book concealing the character’s human identity. For example, when Artie is talking about the making of the book and

is being interviewed by reporters who are all wearing masks (Spiegelman 202), concealing their personality, only showing the “first impression” one will immediately understand of their heritage as their defining feature. It is a strong commentary from Spiegelman and a simple way of addressing the anti-Semitic glasses through which Jews were viewed during the war.

Another effect of the anthropomorphic animals is that they create a distance between the characters in the novel and the real-life people they represent. This is further amplified by the iconic drawings of the animals – their faces are drawn minimalistically, with very few differences from character to character, the only difference often being their clothing. When following Vladek in the camps, this difference is even eliminated as all the Jews are wearing identical camp uniforms, ultimately stripping away their last piece of identity and fully depicting the Nazi idea of the Jews as a verminous people, not as individual persons.

Spiegelman takes further advantage of comics’ medium conventions when expressing emotion through the eyebrows or dark circles under the eyes of the characters. For example, when Tosha learns that the Germans are clearing out the ghetto that she is staying in with, among others, Vladek’s and Anja’s son Richieu. In the three frames, Tosha’s emotions are presented through dark circles under her eyes, her frowning eyebrows and the cartoon convention of sweat pearls often representing stress, expressing her eminent fear of being taken away by the Gestapo, leading to her killing herself and the three children in her care (Spiegelman 111). Consequently, the graphic narrative of the novel underlines and enhances the verbal narrative showcasing one of the reasons why the medium of the graphic novel is a powerful way to depict the Holocaust.

However, in line with the stereotypical idea of comics being reserved for the younger audience (Chute 462), some critiques might still “conclude that a ‘comic strip’ portraying the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, the Poles as pigs, the French as frogs, the Americans as dogs and the Swedes as reindeer would divert the reader from a meaningful pursuit of Artie’s troubled questions” (Langer). However, this is not the case as Spiegelman uses the anthropomorphic animals to his advantage, for example through the conventions of graphic narrative, as mentioned above, as well as using the iconography to allow the readers to identify themselves with the character. Scott McCloud writes in his book *Understanding Comics* that the “more cartoony a face is, [...] the more people it could be said to describe” (McCloud 31), i.e. by drawing the characters’ faces iconic, Spiegelman enables the reader to identify with the characters and put themselves in a character’s place – allowing the reader to become a Jew in Auschwitz. This could additionally be one of the reasons why *Maus* has become such a central work among the many works depicting the Holocaust and its effect on the survivors.

The ability to immerse oneself into the book is further allowed and enhanced by the panels and frames of the graphic novel. McCloud talks of the reader’s ability to create closure: “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).

Closure is linked to the space between the panels named the gutter; a blank space where the reader turns two separate images into one sequence of related narrative (McCloud 66). In this way “the basic narrative requires a high degree of cognitive engagement” (Chute 460), thus arguing that comics are neither necessarily a medium preserved for a younger demography nor do the simple drawings result in a simple story.

Spiegelman further uses the panels and what is inside them to create an emotional response in the reader and convey a message exclusive to that of the cartoon. In one panel, Vladek and Anja are seen walking on a road with the shape of the Swastika cross (Spiegelman 127) trapping them in Nazi territory with no clear way to escape. Another example is when Vladek is walking in the street and he is seen in one panel formed like the Star of David (Spiegelman 82) that “seems to pin Vladek under a spotlight of anti-Semitism” (Doherty 77). Much like the iconic anthropomorphic animals these panels are exclusive to the medium of the comics and graphic narratives, and the mixture of the comic conventions together with the gruesome stories could be one of the reasons why *Maus* has become such a central work among the many works depicting the Holocaust and its effect on the survivors. “The pictures lack detail but not depth, the low-definition medium enhancing the deep involvement of the reader” (Doherty 77).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, told by the first-person narrator Artie, is a powerful work about the Holocaust and the lasting impact it has on the survivors. The characters are displayed as anthropomorphic animals displaying Jews as mice and Germans as cats creating an immediate metaphorical effect of predator and prey. Spiegelman makes use of conventions known from cartoon drawings to create emotions, thus using the graphic narrative to underline the verbal. *Maus* avoids becoming childish and flat, due to Spiegelman’s ability to captivate the reader by using the conventions to his advantage in approaching the heavy subject matter, allowing the reader to identify with the characters through the iconic drawings, while treating the subject with honesty. In this way, Spiegelman challenges the idea of the comics medium and graphic novels being preserved for fiction narratives by using it to narrate the very real non-fiction tale of his father’s experiences of the Holocaust and thereby creating an “original and authentic form to draw us closer to [the Holocaust’s] bleak heart” (Lawrence), and in doing so paves the way for a new era of graphic novels.

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