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# History beyond The Frame: Exploring the Art in Spiegelman's Maus

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**Abstract:** *The attempt to reflect on the horrific past through the medium of comics sets the tone of the narrative put forth by Art Spiegelman. An episode in World history that is otherwise extremely difficult to talk about is portrayed in a manner that enables the readers to delve deeper into the realm of the Holocaust. The complex notions of power politics and dehumanization are reflected in Maus (Spiegelman Vol.1-2) with an aim to discover the long-lost memory of atrocities meted out to the Jewish community.*

**Keywords:** *Maus, Graphic Novel, Holocaust, History, Jewish Community, Comics, Spiegelman*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are several aspects of *Maus* that prove its avant-garde style in terms of both technique and art. Spiegelman calls his narrative 'comix' which is essentially an amalgamation of a historical topic that is serious but also a narrative that does not shy away from the aspect of entertainment. He argues that though readers often associate humour with the word 'comics', he would rather call his work a 'comix' that is to mix together "because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story." The visual intersection of past and present appear throughout the architecture of panels. The layered narrative that he furnishes, constantly negotiating with the past and the present creates a distance from the actual lived reality of Vladek, thus, making it both complex and easy at the same time for the readers to comprehend.

Defining his own narrative, Spiegelman says, "*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father's story... [It is] an autobiographical history of my relationship with my father, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, cast with cartoon animals" in 'Commix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview.' (Spiegelman 64) Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'Post Memory' is relevant to the style of *Maus*. What comes



after the memory, this narrative is about how Art Spiegelman remembers the memory of his father's point of view. The cutting edge style of *Maus* navigates through the prospect of talking about history in a way that is not hard-hitting at the same time creating a much-required awareness about Nazi genocide alluding to the notion of 'to entertain but to also educate.'

Spiegelman deconstructs the taboo ideas; he presents a difficult history that was fading away with the silence of the survivors. In the post-Auschwitz era, when Theodor Adorno stated "To try poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Spiegelman chose to write and went on to discover a way to represent the holocaust and revive the survivor's tale. Michael Rothberg in his essay 'We Were Talking Jewish: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as "Holocaust" Production' says "By situating a nonfictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, 'comic' space, Spiegelman captures the hyperintensity of Auschwitz." (Rothberg 671) The unreal aspect rooted in the very reality of the action leads to a way of representation.

While dealing with the aspect of depicting traumatic episodes, Spiegelman attempts to reconstruct the history from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Talking about the narrative form of *Maus*, Hillary Chute in her essay "The Shadow of a Past Time": History and Graphic Representation in *Maus* says, "The form of *Maus*, however, is essential to how it represents history. Indeed, *Maus*'s contribution to thinking about the "crisis in representation," I will argue, is precisely in how it proposes that the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories." (Chute 205)

Spiegelman explores all the possibilities of the comic form to present his father's narrative. He uses what Marianne Hirsch defines as the 'Family frame,' by using the story of Vladek's family to situate the Holocaust in the backdrop to make it engaging. Through the lens of an individual's story, one enters into the larger narrative. There is a constant collision of personal and world history. He involves family conversations, personal lives, romance, friendships, jokes, food, travel and employment, and even religious aspects to represent Shoah. On the other hand, one needs to also note that he rejects the idea of the aestheticization of violence. By using the trope of animal imagery, showing Jews as rats, Nazis as cats, and Polish people as pigs, he presents imperfect images.

Talking about the art of *Maus*, we need to take into account the use of the "Alienation Effect" coined by Bertolt Brecht. It is a technique wherein familiar contents are presented in an unfamiliar way so that the audience/readers do not empathize with the characters or the content. Art Spiegelman uses animal imagery to create an estrangement, ultimately creating a distance between the reader and the content. Paul Buhle in his essay 'Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age,' says "More than a few readers have described [Maus] as the most compelling of any [Holocaust] depiction, perhaps because only the caricatured quality of comic art is equal to the seeming unreality of an experience beyond all reason." (Buhle 56) This strategy certainly adds to the avant-garde aspect of *Maus* and comes out as an extremely novel way of representing trauma visually.

Instances such as when Vladek and Anja joke about Artie's hand showing up like Hitler or the very depiction of Hitler on the cover page as a cat with a moustache hint towards the parody of the oppressors. The dehumanization of the characters also reflects on the cruel acts of violence directed towards Jews by the Nazi rulers. The expressionistic style used in the art of *Maus* reflects on the modern strategies of its depiction. For instance, the hanging bodies of the mice painted on the wall of Vladek's house can certainly be considered as the inner emotions of fear depicted outside. The reader needs to take into account all such evidence to understand the style of portrayal.

Marianne Hirsch in her essay 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory' argues that the kind of narrative style Spiegelman uses essentially "eradicates any clear cut distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic." (Hirsch 15) In a process to rebuild history, the need to document and record every word of Vladek and collect every photograph is apparent in the narrative. Spiegelman goes on to use the method of foregrounding and backgrounding wherein he places all the pieces of evidence such as train tickets, photographs of Anja and Vladek, Nazi camp notices, etc to lend a documentary-like structure to the narrative. A post-modern strategy of art can certainly be traced in the graphic narrative. The intertextuality of the graphic novel is a unique structure. Multiple storylines and the interchangeable nature of time and space adds to the complexity of reading. However, this also reflects on the entangled quality of history and memory.

The major line of enquiry of this graphic narrative is to delve deeper into the ways or representing Art to resist and express an alternate history. An effort has been made to bring together facts and individual memories to amalgamate them together and produce a narrative rich with accounts that usually get untold in the official archives. Building the History from below through various shreds of evidence depicts the craft of Spiegelman who affirms time and again that the form of comics should not be just be limited to stories that we are accustomed to, Art can be used to tell difficult stories that further help to reinstate the existence of voices that were otherwise muffled.

Hillary Chute continues to state that throughout *Maus* he represents the complicated entwining of the past and the present by "packing" the tight spaces of panels. He found an "architectonic rigour.

. . . necessary to understand to compose the pages of *Maus*," he explains (qtd. in Silverblatt 33), and

has commented: "Five or six comics on one piece of paper ... [I am] my father's son" (Spiegelman, Address). It is to this effect that *Maus* exploits the spatial form of graphic narrative, with its double-encodings and visual instalment of paradoxes, so compellingly, refusing telos and closure even as it narrativizes history. In this light, I will analyze a range of sections of the book: some that have been treated comparatively little in *Maus* criticism, such as the multitemporal panel in the embedded comic strip "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" and the double epitaph of the book's last page, and some that have not been treated at all, such as the scene that centers on a timeline of Auschwitz.



Nowhere does *Maus* claim to be a tell-all book that is exhaustive in nature, there are several problems that it faces down to the art, text and even the marketing of it. One of the greatest effects that it creates is that of the vicarious past. People like Art Spiegelman who belong to the second generation of Holocaust survivors have only come to know about it through their ancestors' accounts, their memories and oral narratives. This is exactly what Spiegelman attempts to do. He engages in what Rothberg terms as 'Memory Citizenship.' Through the memories of the survivors, people become a part of the trauma and violence. James E. Young in the essay 'The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's "Maus" and the Afterimages of History,' says "By embodying what Marianne Hirsch has aptly termed an aesthetics of postmemory, *Maus* also suggests itself as a model for what I would like to call "received history"-a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us. Like Hirsch, I would not suggest that post-memory takes us beyond memory or displaces it in any way, but it is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by a deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on the memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination." (Young 669)

While one can understand the unique style of *Maus*, there comes an impending question of the limitations of representation of history. In the narrative, we also encounter the issue of commercialisation of the Holocaust and the futility of remembrances. Michael E. Staub in his essay 'The Shoah Goes on and on: Remembrance and Representation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*' says, "Spiegelman's *Maus* argues within itself about proper methods for the embodiment of historical memories that are simultaneously horrible to contemplate, necessary to document, and inevitably open to contest." Such internal debates within the narrative make *Maus* a revolutionary graphic narrative that reflects the reality of Shoah.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the combination of word and pictures lead to the development of a narrative technique that makes telling of a difficult tale, a possibility. While the notions of presentation and re-representation are still subject to various arguments, the technique of Spiegelman comes out to be avant-garde. Unlike, the erstwhile images of the Holocaust that were

almost pornographic with a certain propagandist agenda, *Maus* developed a style that changed such notions and affirmed that there indeed is a way to represent trauma and reconstruct the history from below.

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