

## **The Figuration of Art, History and Self: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as a Palimpsest**

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**Abstract:** The winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1991, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is an iconic work of world art. Seldom does one come across a work that challenges the parameters of its own creation in such a radical way. A graphic novel that is both biographical and autobiographical, history and fiction, memoir and comic art, pushing generic integrities to collapse upon themselves, *Maus* has deserved the critical and popular success it has garnered worldwide.

A testimonial to the never-ending horrors of the Holocaust, *Maus* has popularly been read as an attempt at exorcism of the author's demons, and perhaps with him of a race caught in the warps of history and time. As the narrator tries to tell the story of his life, through the story of his father's experiences in Nazi Poland, he creates theriomorphic creatures to define the parameters of human existence in the sub-human dimensions of unspeakable nightmares of history. Disney's beloved Mickey Mouse and the cat and mouse chase of children's stories assume Kafkaesque grotesqueness in the mice, cats, pigs and sundry animals that 'people' this authorial world divided across religious and political affiliations. Through the passive aggressive narrative of the Oedipal struggle between the father and the son emerges the story of lives caught in the whirlpool of timespans, continents, memories and generations.

My paper seeks to explore the complexity of the visual-autobiographical articulations of selfhood through the intersections of genre, history and language. The layers of remove that frame this novel can be understood as the constructive aesthetic of Spiegelman's effort in illustrating and writing *Maus*. The ironical self-distancing of the author and characters make this work of self-writing-illustrating unique beyond the pale of mere self-reflexivity. It is not simple a book about the writing of a book that encapsulates a piece of history. It goes a step ahead to talk about identity as fraught in the process of remembering, writing, re-writing and reading. Spiegelman's narrator Art is a mouse on account of his Jewish roots that cannot be shaken off,

but assumes the mask of one, too, because the task of writing and publishing need one to make a mask out of one's most personal sentiments. My paper further argues that the remembered history in *Maus* can only ever be constructed one, which complicates the understanding of the text as a testimonial/memoir/history. By exploring the visual and verbal language along with the paratextual elements of the novel, I will finally posit that *Maus* is a text that writes and re-writes itself across a range of selfhoods, meaning-making and search for closure that is perpetually deferred and thus unreachable.

**Keywords:** *Maus*, Art Spiegelman, palimpsest, graphic narrative

Since its first publication, Art Spiegelman's pathbreaking graphic novel, *Maus*, has continued to engage the imagination of readers and academia alike. Notwithstanding its cult status today, critics, illustrators and readers, in addition to the author himself, have never quite been able to say *enough* about this book. This enduring popularity stems from the layered narrative that engages deeply with debates about aesthetics, history and politics, in a complex personal tale of individual creativity and historical trauma.

*Maus* first appeared in the early 1980s as chapters in Spiegelman's comic magazine, RAW, and, subsequently, as a two-part book series published in 1986 and 1991, respectively. In its nearly four-decade-long legacy, punctuated by several awards (including the Pulitzer Prize in 1992), *Maus* has been credited for the newfound respectability of graphic novels/comics at the turn of the century. In many ways, *Maus* has paved the way for the profusion of graphic memoirs of the nineties with writers like Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel expanding the possibilities of the comic book medium to tell distinctly non-comic life stories.

While it is fascinating to explore the poetics of self-writing published serially in fragments of magazine chapters over several years, it is to be noted that *Maus* garnered the kind of blockbuster success it did only after it appeared in book form. While raising questions about the structural and chronological unity of life writing, this also draws attention to the 'constructed' nature of a testimonial about the unspeakable and un-representable horror that is the Holocaust. The sensitivity and acute self-reflexivity of the narrative has led some commentators to conclude that *Maus* is a suitable response to Theodor Adorno's famous statement about the barbarism of writing poetry after the Holocaust. The triumph of this postmodern narrative lies in its breaking *into* the meaning of 'art' in the post-World-War world, while gaining its representational legitimacy from the perspective of a second-generation survivor.

This paper concerns itself not so much with what is said *about* the Holocaust and its impact on survivors' lives, but much more with *how* it is said through the medium of the comic/graphic narrative. Despite the representational distance, is it possible to narrate an essential experience through an aestheticization of the Holocaust? Can one dare to do it? And even if one articulates that fragmentary experience, as capably as Spiegelman does, is it still not a mediated and belated narrative anyway? How can we discursively talk about selfhood and meaning when it is ensnared in such troubled historical waters that are deceptively easy to access in the comic-book mode? Through a deployment of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" (5) in postmodern literature, I argue that *Maus* engages with many levels of visual and verbal storytelling in a palimpsestic text that writes and un-writes itself to create new frontiers for the genre of life-writing.

### **What is a Genre?: Holocaust Comix**

Perhaps a good starting point to think about these issues would be to consider the essential question about generic definitions. The primary disjunction between the comic mode and the extremely tenuous, controversial subject of the Holocaust, on which the narrator Artie's relationship with his father is staged, led to the rejection of *Maus* by all the leading publication houses of America in the eighties. Besides subverting generic expectations, Spiegelman went a step ahead to anthropomorphize the Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs and Americans as dogs, deliberately overplaying racist stereotypes. While using animal metaphors satirically has had a potent legacy in the twentieth-century from Kafka to Orwell, Spiegelman's metaphors are also to be seen in relation to the American underground comix movement of the sixties that was already radically subverting the animal figures of children's comics by transposing them onto very adult themes (Huyssen 125). As a stalwart of the movement, Spiegelman favoured the genre of the 'comixx', which is essentially a graphic autobiography, to undertake this ambitious creative project (Bosmajian 26). Through these animal metaphors, the discomfort of the subject of genocide is intensified by not allowing the reader comfortable access into history or the lives of survivors through narrative realism. The comix mode makes irony the definitive entry point into the text.

However, owing to its rising global popularity through translations into nearly 30 languages, *Maus* made way into school textbooks and college courses on life writing, literature, history, the Holocaust and even psychotherapy. As early as 1986, it was even nominated for the National Book Circle Award in the category of biography (Witek 4). Pushing generic limitations was clearly part of Spiegelman's architecture of this text which has variously been called history, testimonial, graphic memoir, autobiography and image-text (Chaney 4). Not only is *Maus* metafictional in the typically postmodern sense, but it also combines metatextuality and metavisuality, as I will later show.

Two notable anecdotes about *Maus*'s history require attention in this regard. First, as Marianne Hirsch has observed, Spiegelman's avowed ambition in his early years as a comic artist was to write the "Great American Comic Book Novel," which eventually culminated in the hybrid auto-/biographical *Maus* (24). Second, when the *New York Times* Book Review listed *Maus* in its 'Bestseller Fiction' category, Spiegelman immediately shot off a letter to the editor claiming that such nomenclature falsifies the testimonial angle of his work and the thirteen painstaking years of research that went into its making. He cheekily wrote,

I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special "nonfiction/mice" category to your list? (*MetaMaus* 150)

While Spiegelman's reaction promptly shifted *Maus* into the non-fiction list, this is precisely the kind of problem that lies at the heart of the conception and reception of this text. It is clear that the 'truth-telling' of the auto-/biographical mode will not suffice in the comic medium that is trying to grapple with a historically specific yet intensely personal subject for Spiegelman.

This problem is amplified by the fact that *Maus* is not simply Art's father, Vladek's biography ensconced within the son's own auto-biographical comix (what Bosmajian has called a 'double autobiography' (2)). It is also a book *about* the writing-illustrating of a biography and auto-biography combined in one. According to Kathleen Ashley et al.,

The mark of autobiography is a discursive effect, an effect of reading in relation to certain discourses, defined through the simultaneous assembling and disassembling of other discourses and genres... it is also, to be sure, a crisis in the hierarchy of autobiographical identities, for it is the autobiographer who becomes the site of meaning in this activity as producer of meaning and organizer of knowledge. (8)

In this specific sense, *Maus* is both a meta-biography and a meta-autobiography. Commenting on this ambiguity of genres, Paul John Eakin says,

Spiegelman wants us to see him seeing, to see him transforming himself into the equivalent of an eyewitness who would have *seen* – and hence could draw in graphic images – what his father relates. (15)

However, Spiegelman does not stop at being the witness. He ironizes his own vision and truth-claim by adding layers of remove into the text that subvert any final meaning one might try to cull from it. In many ways, then, the comic medium itself becomes part of the message: the cartoon about the Holocaust gets respectability from the Holocaust, but the intergenerational trauma it begets also becomes accessible only through the comic book medium.

## The Figuring of Meaning

The problem of representation clearly lies at the heart of Spiegelman's work, as it does with many subsequent postmodern graphic narratives. The obsession with historical detailing and 'getting everything right' is evident right from the beginning of the text. Artie is shown visiting his aging father and interviewing him about his experiences in Nazi Poland, despite the latter's insufferable, overbearing personality. Artie's insistence on chronological narration and probing for the smallest detail stands in direct contrast with his abandonment of realism when it comes to the actual representation of the characters. One can read the text separately as prose without even realising that all the characters illustrated in the book are animals with human bodies. As Andreas Huyssen has noted,

...Maus acknowledges the inescapable inauthenticity of Holocaust representation in the "realistic" mode, but it achieves a new and unique form of authentication and effect on the reader precisely by way of its complex layering of historical facts, their oral retelling, and their transformation into image-text. (131)

This effort to explore the fault lines of combining historical veracity and artistic license, while attempting justice towards each, is what makes *Maus* unique. The first part of the text is titled 'My Father Bleeds History'. As much as the experiential history runs in Vladek's blood, and continues to bleed (figuratively) into Artie's life and his ink, the real artistic labour lies in using that personal history to 'colour' the narrative. In Spiegelman's own words, "...history was far too important to leave solely to historians" (*MetaMaus* 100). Commenting on the discourse of historical veracity, Hutcheon observes:

Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the "world" and literature. The textual incorporation of these intertextual past(s) as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity - both literary and "worldly." (4)

The raw material for *Maus* derives from a series of conversations that Spiegelman had with his father in 1972. The book opens with an epigraphic comic which shows young Artie crying before his father after being ridiculed by his friends. Instead of pacifying the child, we see Vladek questioning the basis of friendship and emotion by referring to his own experience of the Holocaust, thereby dismissing the child's suffering. The opening serves to problematize the idea of personal suffering and guides the reader into the text with a firm scepticism and ironic distance.

The role of the metanarrative in *Maus* is, therefore, central to understanding its aesthetic intent. Narratives tend to structure experience in the form of stories related within a linguistic frame. In *Maus*, this frame draws attention to itself as the only, if limited, means of accessing any truth about the survivors' experience and about the historical experience of the *Shoah*. Autobiography, as Leigh Gilmore has noted,

...draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling (qtd in Chaney 3).

In his nested narrative, Spiegelman does not allow any one point of view to stabilize long enough to make the reader comfortable. Each panel of each page of the book has its own narrative grammar of words and image. Right on the cover page of the first chapter, Vladek is shown prying himself away from a woman helplessly tugging at his feet. The story begins with Artie asking Vladek about how he met his wife Anja. Vladek begins an account of his early life, his enterprising spirit, his casual affair with Lucia, before finally meeting Anja and marrying her. He seemingly controls the narrative despite Artie's effort to give it a starting point and a perspective through his abandonment of Lucia. However, once Vladek tells the story, he asks Artie not to include his affair and abandonment of Lucia in his book because it was not directly related to Hitler and "isn't so proper, so respectful" (25). The last panel shows Artie promising not to do so. Narrative authority has clearly been wrestled back out of Vladek's hands and seems to privilege faithfulness to none.

The Oedipal tussle between the father and son metonymically defines the larger structure of the text, too. In every chapter, Vladek's character develops admirable qualities of resourcefulness, love for his family, presence of mind, and sheer luck, which is then subverted by his miserliness, lack of empathy for his son or second wife, Mala, and his essential narcissism. This works not just in relation to Vladek but to other characters, too. Vladek's views on Mala's greed and carelessness are contrasted immediately with Mala's constant mistreatment and suffering in marriage with Vladek (132). Artie himself comes across as an indifferent son who only needs his father's story for his personal agenda, albeit with occasional pangs of guilt. No character or point of view is allowed to stabilize, and suffering neither elicits pity nor ennobles anyone.

There are also other moments in the text when the discursive limits of narration become evident. Vladek's story seamlessly follows a sequence that is sometimes too perfect for a real life situation. All the betrayers of the Jews end up dead or in the camps at Auschwitz; there is an inordinate amount of luck in all of Vladek's near escapes from death; the role of the dream, fortune-telling and numerical mysticism - all make the figurative nature of the plot evident. While Spiegelman testifies to the authenticity of each of these events related by his father, he

cannot help admitting that the comic medium has its own architectonics that shapes a narrative. He admits that “each page is a visual paragraph” (*MetaMaus* 166) and despite his obsession with detailing, many “things had to be suppressed, pulled forward and shaped to make the narrative” (29).

In her psychoanalytic reading of *Maus*, Hamida Bosmajian claims that Vladek’s story is the master narrative of this autobiography which marginalizes Artie’s constant struggle for acknowledgement. The real subject of this work is ‘the orphaned voice’, she claims. Such a reading tends to ignore the battles over narrative authority that are being fought out in the text. The point of *Maus* is not to locate meaning in any one source but to recognise that the structures of truth-telling and hearing/reading are mere constructs. In effect, when the story ends, Vladek comes to no new realization, nor does Artie gain any more insight into his own self through his autobiography. Yet the relating of the story remains important.

Another significant dimension to a survivor's testimonial is that of time and memory. The task of memorializing, innate to life-writing, gets intensified in the comic when a single page can have several panels in multiple time zones, any of which can be observed and compared to each other in one instant. For example, the panel showing Jewish rebels at Auschwitz hanging from a nearby tree in the foreground, as Artie and Francoise return from the supermarket in their car with Vladek, tends to collapse timelines (239). Marianne Hirsch’s famous essay on the connection between memory and post-memory in the context of trauma and generational distance in *Maus*, highlights the performative element in Spiegelman’s craft. Spiegelman himself admits, “remembering those who remembered the death camp is a hard act to follow” (*MetaMaus* 13), and it is a much harder task to represent that memory in language.

*Maus* uses the trope of the memorial effectively, by juxtaposing both Vladek’s and Art’s memories together, as both constitutive as well as delimited when the personal-political are concerned. In chapter two of *Maus II*, Artie is seated on a pile of human corpses and working on his comic even as he is surrounded by the distressing signs of the popularity of his first book, *Maus I* (201). The guilt of using Vladek’s story to exorcise his own demons as a second-generation American Jew has also led to a reinforcement of the same identity crisis that he sought to escape.

This tension is worked into *Maus* through other competing counter-memories that do not let Vladek’s version monopolize the Holocaust experience. Mala’s experience of the trials in Srodula, as well as the psychoanalyst Pavel’s, throw light on other modes of existence in Nazi Europe. Having survived the Holocaust themselves, these two characters do not exhibit the same kind of miserliness or radiate the same “claustrophobia” as Vladek (182). Even the reference to Anja’s destroyed diaries and Artie’s search for his mother’s voice are woven into the narrative very effectively (160). The (silenced) voice of Anja serves as another counter-testimonial to Vladek’s self-affirmative story related by Artie.

This disjunction is also evident at the level of the visual narrative. Artie's son, Richieu's, misbehaviour at the table and the orchestra scene are much discussed in this context. Even the wearing of a pig mask over his mouse face by Vladek when trying to pass off as Polish, or the mouse mask by Artie and Pavel over their human faces, are cases in point. The detail that Pavel keeps a framed picture of his cat on his table makes Artie wonder – "Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?" (203). He, of course, is not talking of self-consciousness as much as drawing attention to his craftsmanship. As Jeanne Ewert says, the graphic elements and pictorial sub-narratives in *Maus* help readers "to read against the grain of the verbal text" (188). What is told to us in words is not always replicated by the drawings in the panels. In the beginning of *Maus II*, we are shown Artie sitting under a tree and drawing rough sketches of different animals, ranging from a moose, a frog and a rabbit, to represent his French wife, Francoise, who is of different ethnicity than the Americans, Nazis or Jews. In the next panel she appears as a mouse and asks him to draw her as one since she has converted to Judaism in order to marry Artie (171). In another instance, we are shown a prisoner in Auschwitz complaining and resisting his maltreatment because he is a German being mistaken for a Jew. The consecutive panels show him as a mouse and then as a cat, in the same striped prison uniform, again playing up the visual animal-metaphor (210).

Such self-reflexive moments abound in the text. It is perhaps nowhere more conspicuous than in the separate inclusion of the comic titled 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History' right in the middle of Vladek's story. This comic about his mother's death, which Spiegelman had published in an underground magazine in his youth, resurfaces like the repressed into the frame-narrator Artie's present (and also the reader's). It is another nested narrative within the frame that obliquely comments on the visual-verbal tensions. Bosmajian sees this as an instance of Artie's horror at his mother's death and 'a way of compensating for his exclusion from the facticity of the *Shoah* as a historical event' (18). Hirsch and Huyssen, on the other hand, see it as breaking the framework of the testimonial by miming and challenging the terrors of memory and post-memory (129). The distinctly different expressionist style of the 'comic-within-the-comic' obviously comments on the larger mediations in the text, but more importantly, it draws attention to the text itself as a prison of simulacra. The frame immediately preceding the actual comic shows Artie holding the comic in which a hand is seen holding Anja and Artie's photograph (101). The photograph is the frame of the comic which is framed by Artie's hand and further framed by the reader's at a triple remove. This meta-textual awareness is not simply to ironize the creative process but the entire project of seeking meaning on the part of a reader/outsider who invariably becomes indicted in the process of textual construction.

### **Self-making and Art-making**

Beyond the aesthetic underpinnings of this unique text, one sees evidence of Spiegelman's personal struggle with 'making sense' of his own life and his relationship with his father, which is counterposed against his meticulous labour in researching historical details of the



Holocaust that add to the story's veracity. His repeated attempts to have *Maus* published in book form add further nuance to this tussle between personal expression and public validation. His claim that he wanted to refrain from sentimentalising and moralising the genocide as some kind of "Holokitsch", yet not escaping the guilt of *Maus*, is evident not only at the level of the text but also in other works surrounding it (*MetaMaus* 70).

In 1977, Spiegelman had published a book called *Breakdowns* which included the original idea for *Maus* in a compressed, three-page comic. It had several self-referential panels that explored ideas of subjectivity across a range of themes. One of the strips showed the artist drinking from a bottle of ink. The artist writes and creates *on* and *of* himself in the graphic mode. *Breakdowns* went relatively unnoticed, but Spiegelman did not abandon the comix mode and went on to work intensively on *Maus* anyway, which eventually gave him the critical and popular acknowledgement he sought.

However, the exorcism that *Maus* should have affected did not stop Spiegelman from exploring the autobiographical mode further. In 2008, a new version of *Breakdowns* was released, with some additions, under the title *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&\*!*. This re-packaged version reflects the same anxiety about selfhood that preoccupies the artistic vision. Erin McGlothlin calls this constant return to the autobiographical mode:

...one iteration in an ongoing autobiographical project... the latest in a series of autobiographical performances that loop back to previously explored experience not in order to *revise* this material but instead to *re-vision* it. (47)

The point to be noted here is not Spiegelman's preoccupation with artistic self-articulation so much as how these paratexts reflect on a work like *Maus* and its construction. The interplay of practical considerations of marketing and publication are closely woven with 'true' life narratives, which bring attention to the architectonics of *Maus*, repeatedly.

To go one step further, in 2011, Spiegelman gave a set of interviews to Hillary Chute, the graphic novel expert, about *Maus* and everything related to its creation. This book (somewhat predictably) titled *MetaMaus*, has a range of extensive answers by Spiegelman on the choice of subject, medium and mode of construction of *Maus*, along with family photographs, transcripts of recorded conversations with Vladek, research data, interviews with Spiegelman's family and even a CD-ROM that contains all the raw material of this book. Twenty years after the last instalment of *Maus*, somehow it continued to be necessary to explain and answer those questions that hound Spiegelman, despite numerous interviews he himself has given about it, and a host of secondary literature occasioned by the novel. The need for publication of *MetaMaus* reiterates the same argument about the construction of *Maus* and the failed project of looking for generic, narrative, biographical, or other literary answers in it.

What we have, then, are texts that deliberately create multiple levels of mediations between the Holocaust and the self of Vladek/Artie/Spiegelman that should lie at the core of an auto-/biography. In the introduction to *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman says, “it was hard to revisit *Maus*, the book that both made me and has haunted me ever since” – and yet he does return to it - repeatedly.

As the title of this paper suggests, *Maus* is to be seen as a palimpsest – a text that writes and rewrites itself, interminably, even as the reader approaches it in the hope of finding a crux of meaning. The mediations distance the search for truth from the truth itself, thereby making a palimpsest even out of Artie, who does not really exist as a unified self within his own auto-/biography. He is merely one of the many mediations we come across in the text, and is only another element in the process of narrativization. The figurations in the text are a response to the tensions occasioned by historical metafiction within the genre of life writing. The story of the Holocaust and survival, which we witness as insiders, outsiders and as the intermediate narrator, thus, raises more questions than it answers. The careful figurations of the text, history and the self illustrate *Maus*’s technical brilliance as well as evasiveness.

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