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Art Spiegelman's Maus: (Graphic) Novel and Abstract Icon

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Comic artist Eddie Campbell defines the graphic novel as “a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel,” while also noting that “others employ it to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition—indeed a new medium altogether” (Campbell, 2007, p. 13). Such a definition is significant because of the new treatment given to comics and comic narratives regarding their ability to engage what seem more mature topics. Many look to *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997) as the arbiter of such a formal definition because of its combination of what were viewed as a disparate medium and topic; that is to say, the depiction of a Holocaust survivor’s biography through a graphic narrative. *Maus* is widely regarded as the text that made the idea of the graphic novels prevalent in the public eye, rather than the previous niche connotation given to the world of comics as being comprised only of superhero narratives (Spiegelman’s, *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize and was placed on lists such as *Time Magazines* “100 Best Non-Fiction Books”). The primary use of images within comics and graphic novels, such as *Maus*, forces the reader to acknowledge the events depicted graphically, on the page, whereas in prose novels readers are left to their imaginations. The graphic nature of *Maus* forces readers to acknowledge images of the Holocaust, evoking what comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud calls “closure” within the reader (McCloud, 1993). Through closure, *Maus* attempts to create a functional history of the Holocaust through its readership. Nevertheless, Spiegelman forces readers to take a step backward, criticizing the notion that one can wholly understand a large scale atrocity such as the Holocaust without having actually been there to experience it first-hand.

As a whole, *Maus* uses the graphic medium to convey symbols in such ways that are more difficult to achieve in literature. These images appeal to the reader’s primary perception while engaging the work—sight and the ability to perceive images without the need for literacy—while the dialogue contained within the speech balloons contains information not unlike what one might find in a work of Holocaust literature, images, which can effectively evoke pathos, paired with a narrative commonly conceived of in a solely literary medium form the basis for *Maus* and the reader is presented with minutely detailed drawings that contain as much emotion as the narrative itself. This idea is palpable in an early scene in which Spiegelman’s father, Vladek, is riding an exercise bike (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

The scene emphasizes Vladek's exercise and readers may overlook his concentration camp tattoo. The tattoo shows the power of the images within *Maus*, as the tattoo is always with Vladek, seeing it evokes much stronger emotion than merely imagining a description of such. *Maus* effectively draws readers' attention, not merely through narrative, but also by images representative of a historical period, and the major event associated with it, the Holocaust. Nevertheless, readers may overlook the tattoo on Vladek's arm because of the dialogue that focuses on mundane conversation between father and son rather than the Holocaust narrative that dominates the majority of the graphic novel.

One effective example of image paired with narrative occurs during Vladek's narration of his first sighting of a swastika (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

The character in the upper left panel identifies an object, and the image presents his sense of shock, along with his exclamation. The upper right panel proceeds to show all of the mice in the train compartment looking shocked while the Polish pig in the compartment next to them sits contentedly (the care-free look of the pig juxtaposed with the worry of the mice immerses the reader in a world that was all too real). Finally, the bottom frame, which is the largest, shows a view of the object that shocked the mice so, the Nazi flag displaying the swastika. There were many points-of-view from which Spiegelman could have chosen to draw the picture, yet he chose to draw it over the shoulders of the mice: the reader views *with* them, while subsuming their fear by *seeing* them view. As a result, the image imparts the same sense of smallness that can be seen in the mice.

The page, and event at hand, occurs with little ambiguity and in such a way that the reader can comprehend the characters' evident sense of bewilderment. Jewish literature scholar Erin McGlothlin characterizes *Maus* as a "chronologically ordered attempt to shape the fragmented and disordered memories of the survivor into a readable narrative" (McGlothlin, 2008, p. 99-100). McGlothlin's argument characterizes the greater structural quality of *Maus*, however the ordering that Spiegelman maintains for the reader is similar, occurring on a more minute level. The panels themselves play a role in shaping the interpretation of the page. McCloud posits that readers interpret the world of graphic novels through a process known as closure, or the ability to unify panels and "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud, 1993, p. 67). The artist's ordering, sizing, and shaping of particular panels influences the reader's chronological perception of events that are occurring on a motionless page. For this reason Spiegelman himself notes that he finds comics a compelling medium for relating history due to the "abstraction and structurings that come with the comics page...In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one doesn't displace the other" (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 165). By constructing panels in a certain way, Spiegelman is able to give a perception of time that is fluid, rather than linear. In doing so, the structural composition of *Maus* influences a reader's overall understanding of the history behind the narrative. The past is always present in an influential sense.

On the page that depicts Vladek's first sighting of a swastika (see Figure 2), Spiegelman has ordered the panels in what is known as a moment-to-moment transition, which require the least amount of closure.¹ Each panel presents an image that is logically linked to the panel before it—the reader must simply fill in the

gaps. Closure is easily imagined because of the deliberate, and plainly simple, chronological ordering. The deliberate sequencing further highlights, the third and final panel. This panel is larger than previous panels, imparting a sense of importance. The sizing of a panel is an element of the craft that signals the highlighting of a certain symbol or image and Spiegelman himself notes “a large panel allows you to enter, pause, and understand the importance of a moment” (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 175). This moment is fundamentally structured in such a way that conveys the memories so the memories can be easily understood by the reader. The fear that can be seen within the mice is grounded in an object that, arguably, all post World War II readers can easily identify. In this case, that object is the Nazi flag.

Because the graphic element of *Maus* functions in conjunction with the literary element, the work possesses a dynamic that differs from the way in which prose narratives function. While literature uses a solely textual medium, Kai Mikkonen understandably posits that graphic novels “manipulate the relation between the visual and verbal” (Mikkonen, 2010, p. 74), allowing them to achieve two separate aims at once. Images, whether in a panel or not, are in a constant state of showing, while the narration is in a constant state of telling. The scene presented in Figure 1 reads as comprehensible when viewed solely in terms of its images, but the reader also receives Vladek’s narration to *tell* the story: “here was the first time I saw, with my own eyes, the swastika” (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 34). When put together, the sense of showing and telling, as it is achieved in *Maus*, gives the reader a sense of informational input regarding the work as a whole by providing chronologically comprehensible images underscored by dialogue and narration. Understanding the literary narrative leads to a heightened understanding of the image—constituting a greater understanding of the work as a whole—although it is not necessary to comprehend the narrative to gain an understanding of the images. The image based nature of *Maus* serves to enhance its literary qualities, grounding the reader with both image and text as a means of including the reader within the functional history *Maus* aims to establish.

With the employment of a primarily graphic medium also comes to the ability to implement new forms of representation that the literary medium cannot. The images of comics are composed of icons that actively attempt to represent the real life objects they caricature. Within comic and art theory, an icon refers to “any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea” (McCloud, 1993, p. 27). The icons in *Maus* would include any objects within the world that Spiegelman has (re)created for the reader, which require very little

closure for the reader to imagine a real world. Of course, this quality of the graphic novel, in part, results from Spiegelman's decision to use what seem to be generic icons as characters: animals. But this of course begs an important question: how do mice serve as a sort of metaphor for the representation of the Jewish people? Jewish literary critics argue that there is a history of using mice as icons in Jewish graphic novels that extends beyond *Maus* (Mulman, 2008, p. 87), often citing Horst Rosenthal's comic of Mickey Mouse in Gurs concentration camp as an exemplarity. This overt use of the mouse as a symbol seems to subvert the anti-Semitic thought that, Mickey Mouse, "the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal" (Spiegelman, p. 164), yet there is an answer derived from the world and language of comics that can help to explain the dominant use of the animal icon.

While some scholars argue for the history of using mice as the Jewish icon, others argue that Spiegelman's decision to use animals, rather than actual people, stems from a crisis in symbolic representation, on the part of the author (McGlothlin, 2008, p. 101). While compelling, this explanation is not fulfilling. In addition to being Jewish, Spiegelman is a comic artist, and his employment of the mouse as an icon, as a representative symbol for Jews, has its basis in a genre of comics known as "funny animals," which employs animal characters that possess humanoid qualities and anthropomorphic traits such as walking upright or living in houses. Funny animals do not need to be funny, just as comics do not need to be comedic in nature. Within *Maus*, the use of the mouse as an icon signals Spiegelman's intention to include the reader in the narrative as a whole. Comics themselves are simply cartoons that the reader must animate imaginatively through closure, signaling the notion that "the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (McCloud, 1993, p. 36). Any drawing that is simple in design highlights the narrative, making who the characters are matter less, and what they say and do matter more. There is less focus on the iconography of the characters, such as what they are wearing, what equipment they may have, etc., and more of a focus on the narrative and how the characters themselves fit within the framework thereof. The ostensibly simple style of drawing seen in *Maus* is a stylistic element of the text to draw the reader in.

The iconic representation of the characters in *Maus* is more abstract than in other comics, thus making the characters "blank slates." An adverse example would be a superhero comic such as *Batman*, whose titular character lacks an abstract presence due to the highly realistic and detailed drawings in which he is

often depicted—reader imagination is not as required because Batman is clearly identifiable as an icon, even based solely on his color scheme (McCloud, 1993). The characters within *Maus*, on the other hand, are highly abstract, to the extent that the characters look the same, clothing differences aside. Because of this facet, the reader must rely on what the characters say and do, rather than their explicit graphic iconography, to determine which character is actually speaking and what is occurring within the narrative. One particular scene between Art and Mala exemplifies the abstract nature of Spiegelman's icons (see Figure 2). Without the text, the reader is unable to tell which character is which, as can be done through the conventional mechanics used in literature (i.e. narration of the character's gender), in which case the scene presented becomes one mouse that becomes what seems angry at another, similar looking, mouse. This aspect of Spiegelman's work draws further attention to the narrative itself, the Holocaust narrative, causing the reader to acknowledge the occurrences of the narrative to understand the characters involved, and the images as they are presented.

Aside from emphasizing character thought, the abstract nature of the characters creates an environment in which reader subjectivity is more easily inserted into the work. Identity and awareness are pulled into the realm of the comic due to the seemingly amorphous iconography of the characters themselves. Rather than being presented with a concrete icon such as Batman, iconic bat symbol and all, the reader is given mice that resemble one another (see Figure 2). The use of mice then becomes the object that makes the reader identify with the narrative: "the more abstract the presentation of the graphic image, the easier for the viewer to insert his or her own subjectivity into the image" (Mulman, 2008, p. 88). This process occurs through the closure that *Maus* so easily evokes within the reader. As a result, the reader is drawn into the narrative in such a way that creates an awareness of the event as a lived historical experience rather than an objective historical occurrence. Due to the characters' lack of definitive iconography, the readers themselves become the characters within the narrative. There is an emphasis on reader participation, occurring unknown to the reader, through the easily achieved closure that makes graphic novels such as *Maus* function as literary work. Still, such a conclusion requires the juxtaposition of abstract concept and literal concept, within the work itself.

The abstract nature of the icons within *Maus* can be highlighted through an analysis of the more literal icons that can be found within the work. The few images within the work that depict actual humans do so

showing the figures wearing mouse masks. One such example, in a sort of meta quality, depicts Spiegelman himself perched over a drawing board as he is struggling with the success of the first publication of his father's story (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Spiegelman's decision to depict himself wearing a mask has obvious roots in the history of using mice for Jewish representation, but it also stands out as an element that signals its own self as an overtly literal icon. It is literal in the sense that this page, unlike any other within *Maus*, realistically depicts a man as nothing more than a man. The story told within this page is Spiegelman's own story as he struggles with relating to his fathers' experience. Readers can clearly interpret the icon on the page as a man with a mask on, as he possesses overtly human characteristics. Therein is the authorial intent: when these icons are juxtaposed with the more abstract icons within the novel, the more abstract icons stand out as being less "full." There is more room for the reader's subjectivity to enter into the characters of the Holocaust narrative. Spiegelman effectively labels his story as a personal one, which differs from the collective historical event that was the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the pile of dead mice under Spiegelman complicates the message, as it emphasizes the disparity between Spiegelman, who wears a mask and did not actually experience the Holocaust, and the mice in the pile, those who did experience the event. Here, Spiegelman asks the reader to step back, hence supplying facts that pertain to an objective account of the event. Such a complication is problematic because it inhibits the reader from inserting subjectivity by forcing them to take a step back. Despite this, Spiegelman's strategy remains effective because it forces the reader to come to terms with the fact that they cannot wholly understand such an event without having experienced it.

Of course, the self-reflexive nature of the scene holds other implications for Spiegelman's narrative and attempt at creating a functional history. The page at hand also depicts the "aftereffects of the mass trauma of the Holocaust on subsequent generations" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106) through a concept known as "postmemory," a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch.² Here, the reader can see Spiegelman's apparent struggle of accepting the trauma that occurred to the generation before his: "between May 16, 1944 and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews are gassed in Auschwitz" (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 201). This page, and the subsequent pages depicting Spiegelman with his therapist Pavel, serves as a sort of exegesis on the narrative as a whole, which supplies the reader with the grounding knowledge that is typical of a statistical account of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's trouble lies in the fact that he can't "visualize it [Auschwitz] clearly and...can't begin to imagine what it felt like" (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 206). This is the main exegetic function of *Maus*, visually representing the Holocaust so it can be understood by the reader. Spiegelman uses authorial

voice to draw the reader into the narrative world, including the facts, in retrospect, of the event depicted. In keeping with the abstract nature of the mouse icon, the reader becomes what Spiegelman is within this scene—people wearing masks to assume the trauma of an event passed. There is a direct attempt at comprehending the event, although Spiegelman seems to criticize the thought that someone who is not a Holocaust survivor can actually experience the event. Nevertheless, Spiegelman does both, attempts to foster an understanding, all the while indicating that such an event cannot be wholly comprehended by those who were not there.

Graphic novels are similar to novels in many dimensions but they also allow for a graphic, rather iconic, presentation. Spiegelman's use of a graphic medium is a notable decision to force the reader to acknowledge the images, thereby becoming immersed in the world on the page. Due to the reader's engagement with text and image, one might characterize a reader of graphic novels as primarily sight based. For this reason, Spiegelman notes the presence of the reader that is integral in the understanding of comics. He argues that "whatever's dramatic in a comic can be stopped with the blink of an eye" (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 166) unlike other mediums, such as film which progresses with or without viewer interaction. As a result, the use of images has a gripping effect on the reader, provoking a sense of interest in the narrative occurrences and the history of the Holocaust, not unlike that of Spiegelman in the subtext of *Maus*. The images are in a constant state of showing, which give the reader information in such a way that literature cannot, although the reader still receives that information through narration and dialogue. The reader imagines the world that persists within *Maus*, and the sense of closure that is formed—through the work as a whole—comes as a result of its primarily image-based nature. This very closure immerses the reader in Holocaust history, giving them a part in its maintenance, through the literary medium as a whole.

ENDNOTES:

¹ In the same way cinema utilizes different types of shots and cuts for different effects, graphic novels do as well. Many of the pages in *Maus* utilize what McCloud calls a moment-to-moment transition, which are among the simplest of the transitions for readers to comprehend. This transition makes the implied action between the panels more easily imagined, and thus the closure is invoked more easily.

² For Hirsch, second generation Holocaust survivors may take on the trauma of their parents through postmemory. The children of survivors often feel a sort of survivor's guilt in regard to their parents. This concept can be seen directly in *Maus* as Spiegelman talks with his therapist Pavel about his struggling to come to terms with the event, in relation to his father.

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