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“Do You Feel Better Now?” Reclaiming Holocaust Narratives and Delegating Responsibility in Spiegelman’s *Maus*

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Abstract

Through three stacked, interweaving timelines, Art Spiegelman's *Complete Maus* explores the power of intergenerational memory and cultural memory as history. *Maus*, a Holocaust graphic-memoir told by Art (the author, drawn as a mouse), relies on the inaccurate, undated, and unfocused memories of Holocaust survivor Vladek to piece together a narrative that rejects American requests for a story that will make readers "feel better" about historic — and present — atrocities. This reading of *Maus* asserts that — through stacking nonlinear timelines, through visual and written images of timelessness and intergenerational trauma, and through creation of "the super-present" — Spiegelman reveals the raw power of Jewish memory to help survivors keep living and moving through time as whole, embodied agents of change. *Maus* exposes the ways its readers' expectations serve readers themselves, and not necessarily past, present, or future generations of survivors. Demands for Holocaust narratives to assign meaning to genocide and wrap up events into a neat, contained frame lead *Maus* to question, who are these supposedly accurate and authentic narratives for? By reclaiming Jewish memory as that which ignites action, *Maus* demands that its audience face its own agency and passivity in perpetrating (even by lack of action) the ubiquitous conditions that allow events like the Holocaust to occur.

Introduction

While at once intimate and sociable, Spiegelman's *Complete Maus* has also struck many readers as an obscene representation of the Holocaust. Readers may be shocked by a Holocaust narrative with questionable objective accuracy, with no explications of the Holocaust being "the worst crime in human history/the 20th Century", with characters drawn as animals that represent their identities, and with a weaving set of narratives that result in a nonlinear, inconclusive story. *Maus* has had commercial success, despite defying consumer requisites. The self-conscious level of the graphic-memoir reveals the large stacks (and stakes) of reader expectations that are at odds with visual and narrative methods used to portray the lives of Holocaust survivors. Through Art's attempts to navigate the boundaries of noncommunicable emotional authenticity and factual accuracy, trauma and re-traumatization, periodization and lingering presences, his novel *Maus* rejects the task of assuaging consumers' yawning existential confusion in the wake of World War II and the wars that keep coming. In doing so, *Maus* overturns harmful conceptions of 'passive' Jewish victimhood and classifications of mass genocides as isolated incidents, instead offering a narrative about how people carry on — baggage in tow — as breathing, active memories of the past and agents of the present.

Reader Expectations: How They Work and What They Seek

The demand for Holocaust survival stories has created an unspoken but implied industry. In many ways, this industry can be compared to the consumption of "inspiration porn," a term that comedian and disability activist Stella Young coined to categorize news, movies, books, and other entertainment which portray disabled people in a patronizing light for the sole purpose of making able-bodied people feel good. Inspiration porn is often disguised as representation for disabled people or said to highlight their achievements — but the outcome is usually that it allows able-bodied people to compare their own lives to those of disabled people (Young). It seems that able-bodied people feel some cathartic gratitude or inspiration — perhaps like the calculations of gentile Holocaust narrative consumers. Meanwhile, the situation is duplicated when looking at popular misrepresentations of other minority groups. In his article "Why are Gay Characters at the Top of Hollywood's Kill List?", *Guardian* journalist James Rawson explores the motives of movie producers who kill off queer characters by the end of the movie, if not sooner. In Rawson's review of *Behind the Candelabra,* they state, "It is…a film about an [sic] lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender character who suffers and dies. It is a film that reminds viewers that any deviancy from heterosexuality will ultimately result in death by suicide, murder or Aids" (Rawson). The result is supposed to be compassion and acceptance for queer people – but have popular audience interpretations

reaped any better results than the reception of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* has ended anti-Semitic mass shootings?

Popular Holocaust narratives tend to be treated differently: the audience may come away feeling more somber than they would after seeing *Soul Surfer* (2011), with less repressed guilt or reinforced savior complexes than the white viewers of *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and may remember the oppressed victims less casually than those in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Holocaust narratives, however, tend to carry similar messages of passive victimization, notions that the crimes were 'senseless' or beyond rational explanation, and a sober gratitude that "now is a better time," which in turn minimize any internal sense of action or need for additional emotional and cultural labor.

This connection between criteria for Holocaust stories and narrative tropes about other marginalized populations is important to make because it situates the arguments this essay will make in a broader — and perhaps particularly American — cultural context; one that tends to prefer digestibility over deep understanding and personal action. When consumers in this cultural context decide to discuss heavy topics like the Holocaust, we tend to request what Holocaust Study and Narrative Theory researcher Erin McGlothlin calls "sound bites that encapsulate a quick and easy 'Holocaust message' for a public that wants to settle the score with the past" (191-92). Holding McGlothlin's analysis of public sentiment in mind, I argue that readers have fabricated demands to which these narratives must abide: a Holocaust narrative should be told with the utmost factual accuracy; a Holocaust narrative should be told with attention to its classification as a unique event; a Holocaust narrative should be told with a serious, somber tone at all times; and a Holocaust narrative should be told with a clear beginning — Hitler's Rise to Power, and ending — liberation by Allied-Forces.

The demanded ending is exactly what *Maus* withholds from consumers. Instead, it articulates the reverberating effects of trauma on successive generations through nuanced visual and written representations of what accurate timelines are like, and through the organization of daily events and horrific experiences side by side. *Maus* manifests the kind of narrative we need in order to learn how to give more than thoughts and prayers to past victims and believe we will never let the Holocaust happen again. Instead, *Maus* demands that we come to the deep-seated realizations of our own culpability, demand accountability for ourselves and others, and labor for a culture that rejects the foundations of antisemitism and fascism, not simply the edifices they build.

Looking Past: Intergenerational Trauma and the "Super-Present"

Maus' rendering of intergenerational trauma violates, first, a sense of containment for the Holocaust to only first-hand survivors like Vladek and his murdered family members—a notion that may narrow the population for whom reparations are in order. Secondly, it disrupts a common classification of victimhood that could result in unwavering, and arguably patronizing, reverence for the victims who 'had it worse'. The fact that the text is equally, if not more, about Art surviving his parents as it is about Vladek's history results in a narrative that highlights Art as a survivor in more than the 'Holocaust story'. This portrayal breaks with the common notion that Holocaust survivors must be held in reverence above all others. Art often views his father as fallible 'despite' the fact that Vladek is a Holocaust survivor— in one instance, calling him a "murderer" for burning his mother's diaries (Spiegelman 161). This accusation violates the very criteria that the stories of first-hand Holocaust survivors are somehow a perfect, contained matter, and inadvertently takes away one of a person's most human traits – the ability to be imperfect.

In these more obvious instances, Art's stories of survival overpower his father's in a notable way, and may be the scenes that cause the most immediate discomfort to expectant readers. The deep complexities of intergenerational trauma are buried in what Erin McGlothlin argues is a third narrative strand separate from the narrative that follows Vladek's recollections and that follows the timeframe wherein Vladek retells the stories to his son (McGlothlin 182-84). Analyzing this extra, third story within a story that Spiegelman called the "super-present," McGlothlin argues that this narrative strand depicts Art's own struggles with memory, inherited trauma, and the fallout from writing *Maus* (184-86). For the purposes of this essay, the super-present refers to the timelessness of intergenerational trauma, the undeniable presence of Vladek's past, and what exists in a dimension outside of explicable time and space but still exists in memory and bloodlines. The super-present continues to affect the present and future even after an event — the generally recognized time within which the known physical agents of trauma are acting — of cultural traumas like the Holocaust is over.

Within *Maus'* super-present, Art does a lot of thinking and navigating of surreal settings and situations that are simultaneously mashed together with elements of realism — like working at his desk (Spiegelman 201, 207), in his therapist's office (203-06), inside of family photos (274-75),[1] or walking to and from visits with his father (45). All of these moments are outside of the two clear narrative timelines and function as half-way personifications of Spiegelman's doubts, grief, and confusion. In "Auschwitz (Time Flies)," Art is confronted with an onslaught of interviewers and marketers atop a pile of dead bodies. Reporters' questions

pack each frame of a single page: “what message do you want [readers] to get from your book?”, “why should [young Germans] feel guilty?”, and “Let’s talk about Israel” (202). Art visually shrinks in size until, by the end of the last panel, he becomes a crying child overwhelmed with questions and expectations he cannot process or answer on behalf of others, let alone the entire Jewish population along with the Holocaust survivors his desk is built upon.

The representation of this scene belies the horrific context that the conversation within the speech balloons is taking place in. An uncanny visual setting— one that could be an ordinary office, but is made sickening by the desk’s elevation upon a platform of the bodies of Holocaust victims— creates a dissonance between the reality of the Holocaust and the reality of Art’s inherited trauma, along with the reporters who do not register the ground they stand on and their thus insensitive, poorly-formed questions. The last reporter’s ignorant questions, “could you tell your audience if drawing MAUS was cathartic? *Do you feel better now*?” (Panel 8), articulates both a detachment from their surroundings and the answers Art gives, revealing that the questions asked carry the exclusive purpose of getting the ‘publishable’ and ‘news-worthy’ answer. If the reporters had read *Maus*, noticed that Art’s desk is sitting on a mass, perpetually unearthed grave of guilt and exploitation, and listened to his answer, “I want… ABSOLUTION. No… No… I want… I want… my MOMMY!” (Panel 7), noticed his shrinking, and listened to his frustration, they would not think of asking the question, “do you feel better now?”.

Figure 1: Art speaks to marketers atop a pile of dead bodies.

This set of panels exposes how Art himself feels exploited during the process of drawing *Maus* — building his desk on the backs of dead Jews, and on the horror of their experiences — and others' more explicit extraction of financial, emotional, and social capital from his narrative. While the literal situation may have happened, the visual setting in which it took place is unreal. This scene is at once within the presence of the dialogue and reporters and outside of a physical sense of time— within Art's experience of the super-present. Here, he is left to bear the emotional burden of his ancestors' past and to answer for them. Although Art was not present for the events of the Holocaust, it lives on in the aftermath he must reckon with. Emily Miller Budick sums this up in her essay, "Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*":

> The survival of the son becomes less figurative in the second of the two books, when the father actually dies, leaving the son to tell the story on his own and making of that telling something akin to much Holocaust narrative and historical writing generally: a story told in the living present about those who are no longer here to tell their stories themselves. (Spiegelman 381)

The reporters' attempts to get the answers they want, such as, "the message of the Holocaust is the importance of tolerance" and "yes, let's make millions off the vest," show a dissonance between Art's experiential reality and others' selective consumption of Holocaust narratives in a way that borders exploitation.

Singular Linear History Isn't Accuracy—It's Limbo

Maus is always contending with pre-conceived demands for linear, factually accurate history, which often manifest in Art's own insistence that Vladek tells the story in the order that would be digestible for his audience. If Art ever got this start-to-finish story, he never tried to put the comic book in that order. Rather, the lapses between the three narrative strands that Spiegelman decided to insert intermittently throughout the text reveal to readers not only how linear retellings of history are unrealistic to expect from survivors, but also how they fail to show the vital, qualitative accuracy that memory offers as it naturally unfolds. Rita Felski proposes that we think of history "like a crumpled handkerchief" (Felski 576) rather than a more digestible straight line, and that is how I argue *Maus* depicts memory. Moreover, I argue that *Maus* demonstrates how historical interpretation that takes the messiness of memory into account makes for the most accurate renditions. As much as *Maus* documents history, it reveals that history as a human invention is the same as a glorified memory.

Maus shows the dangers of flattening history into a straight line through its rich subtext, revealed when timelines abruptly switch tracks. For example, when Vladek counts his pills while talking to Art at the end of "My Father Bleeds History: Chapter Two/The Honeymoon" (41), he begins to tell his story of being on the warfront with a textbook start: "On September 1st, 1939, the war came. I was on the front, one of the first of…" Then, in the same speech balloon, the present timeline cuts in as Vladek spills his pills and exclaims, "ACH!" As Vladek leads into the story, it almost seems as if he will be fulfilling the listener Art's expectations; he offers an accurate-sounding date and a serious, looming tone ("the war came"). In the next word, however, the "present" barges in with the pill crisis that seems to capture Vladek's attention more so than his dredged-up memories of the war. The fragilely positioned "past" narrative strand then slips away with an unfortunate knock of the elbow, interrupting the impatient consumer's coherent, smooth recalling of events. The dialogue on this panel overlays a present moment, revealing a literal connection between the past and present. Here, however, we see Vladek as human, as a grumpy old man who may be displaying some symptoms of OCD that could be more about trauma than eccentricity and who is a parent that — and I'm sure many of us can relate — seemingly blames their children for small mishaps as a result of grumpiness or unprocessed trauma. If this narrative had gone uninterrupted, into high school textbook-territory, Vladek would not have shown this moment of humanity, which allows us to see him as a person, not an unwilling martyr.

When Art and Vladek's conversation abruptly turns into Vladek's begrudging account of the injustices of aging, readers may have lost their chance at an easy transition into the "Vladek as soldier" part of the narrative — time is being lost, the narrative is interrupted… isn't it insensitive of the author to juxtapose the distress of having to recount pills with his father's war stories like that? On the other hand, it offers a kind of "accuracy" and "authenticity" that can't be (pun absolutely intended) counted out: (1) how memory and remembering works psychologically, (2) the difficulties of trying to have a serious, balanced child-parent conversation, and (3) how people will have more than just a traumatic experience on their minds at any moment in time. In these ways, the past is there in a more slowly permeating, subtle way as it mingles with the present. Trauma, as depicted in *Maus* and in human experience, can easily fall into the background or come back into the foreground.

Felski echoes this dilemma of the past's lingering presence as she discusses the ways in which the process of contextualizing a work of art can reduce it to a product that is confined to one time period, a socioeconomic shift, or a political climate (576-77). She writes that, when context dominates interpretation, "The macrolevel of sociohistorical context holds the cards, calls the tune, and specifies the rules of the game; the individual text, as a microunit encased within a larger whole, can only react or respond to these preestablished conditions" (577). This idea can also be applied to the narrative Art is trying to extract from his father. In places

throughout Volume I, especially, Art embodies reader expectations — urging his father to stay on track of linear time, asking for dates, coming in with a tape recorder like a journalist — instead of being depicted as deeply involved in his own soul-searching as in the later parts of the book.

When Vladek is free to remember the story come back in fragments — in between spilled pills as memories naturally float to the surface — Vladek's ability to be grounded in physical place falls away. Art pushes him to delve headfirst into his memories as they happened linearly. These moments a physically spent, free-floating Vladek begs the questions: does expecting a trauma survivor to recall "accurate" details of their past not only retraumatize them, but also cut the conversation short? Who do these accurate details serve? Is this the kind of extracted accuracy really the most valuable?

Figure 2: Vladek rides his cycling machine.

Sometimes Vladek's physical reactions can show the effect of these expectations, describing what is left unsaid through the comic drawings. One place where this is the case is when Vladek is on his cycling machine. When Vladek shows the weight of his trauma through body language — slumping on the bike seat, putting his face in his hands — he is pictured as riding against an empty background, creating the effect that he is moving forward, but not getting anywhere. This visual of Vladek riding and then stopping in emotional exhaustion usually follows a retelling of a traumatic memory — giving up his son (Spiegelman 83-84), or the gestapo taking his father at the stadium (93). For instance, as he speaks of his friends not coming out of the war and then of giving up his firstborn, Richieu (83), he stops riding suddenly, sitting with his shoulders' slumped. While the mirroring of the panels make it look like both time and Vladek himself have progressed, he is still free-floating in white space, alone. In these moments where Vladek seems only able to express his pain through body language, it becomes visually evident that linear progression is a trick of the mind — or, on a more literal level, a trick of clever artwork.

This example at once suggests an odd timeless limbo and a façade of moving forward

when Vladek gets too caught up with his memories; it also reveals the presence of the past as a white space a person can slip into. These panels have no borders to contain the white space; in fact, as the whiteness flows into the margins of the pages themselves, it becomes confusing, engulfing, and empty in its embrace of everything around it. The only way that Vladek can get out of this limbo is to be brought back into a present frame or some kind of fuller, if more visually cluttered, reality by Art's interruptions. Ironically, even if these interruptions are Art's chastising his father for getting off the linear track (84), they snap him back into the reality of storytelling with his son from the yawning rabbit hole of his past when left unchecked. When asked to go on and on about their memories for the sake of extracting linear accuracy, Vladek shows signs of being retraumatized, wherein the brain is at risk of shutting down because the body is reliving the event. Reliving trauma in this way is not how brains naturally process information. In fact, when the brain cannot stop retelling stories to itself, psychiatrists call the process "rumination" defined as "obsessive repetition of the same thoughts to a degree which interferes with normal psychological functioning ("Rumination"). When people ruminate, the brain is trying to find a solution — a fruitless hunt for accuracy and a solution. In summary; rumination can shut down productive conversations about trauma, what happened, why it happened, and how people can move forward. I argue that these same risks are present when we ask survivors — in this case, Vladek — to relive, blow-for-blow, his traumatic experiences and to retell history without healthy interruptions whether they be asides, environmental distractions, or acknowledgements of feelings and emotions that have arisen. *Maus* affirms these consequences as they apply both to Vladek and Art, and points out the impossibility of encapsulating a complete, "true" history when abiding by readers' expectations that demand a tidy solution to a problem which cultural rumination cannot offer.

(Non) Conclusion

What does it say about us that the American industry for these narratives demand confinement of the Holocaust to a single unique event rather than an ongoing set of circumstances? What does it mean that *Maus* does not give into these criteria, even as its author is urged time and time again to conform *Maus* — already written, already published, there for interviewers to read beforehand — to a predetermined 'meaning' or tidy 'message' ("Art Spiegelman")? It means that we are asking for a resolution or a conclusion; maybe we are asking for a waiving or forgiveness for our own guilt as passive bystanders who continue to refuse access to refugees fleeing similar situations as the one we "will never let happen again." It means that we ask for someone else to do the work of tying up loose ends so that we don't have to do the work of *resolving* and *concluding* the foundations of institutional oppressions that a handful of popular memoirs written by survivors cannot labor for alone and cannot

prevent without active engagement. *Maus* shows the beauty, trauma, love, and frustration of reforming relationships with those whom one shares cultural memories. It also shows the limitations of such narratives to speak for everyone and to have a satisfying meaning. *Maus* does not refuse to do the work of forging meaning for the world; it shows that it cannot, and that the responsibility of providing meaning *and* change fall on the audience who must invest themselves in the mechanisms that allow horrific events to occur, not find a false resolution to ongoing atrocities.

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Notes

[1] For more on family pictures and their manifestation as their own type of presence, read Marianne Hirsch’s “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory.”