

Jacek Partyka

## Communicating Across the Gap: Art Spiegelman's Visualization of the Holocaust

Art Spiegelman's pictorial narrative, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, employs a seemingly inappropriate or even flippant medium for representing the event that according to many defies any accurate representation whatsoever. "The most affecting and successful narrative ever done about the Holocaust" pompously announces the blurb on the flip cover of the book. But is the Holocaust visualized by the American comic-book maker tantamount to bringing into focus a new "vision" of the Holocaust? Pictures arguably weaken the powerful effect hidden in the oblique and the elliptical. So, does Spiegelman propose a genuinely new way of thinking about/imagining the Holocaust?

In a sense, the Holocaust has become an exemplar of inexpressibility. When considered as a purely political idea, this genocide was perfectly rational – the mechanism of the factories of death operated according to meticulous logistics. At the same time, the words of the Nazi propaganda that legitimized it were utterly a-logical, preposterous. On 4 October 1942, acting upon a direct order from Hitler, Heinrich Himmler delivered a famous and often-quoted speech to an assembly of SS officers at Posen. It was the moment when the sentence was passed on European Jewry:

Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, when 500 lie there or 1000. Having borne that and nevertheless – some exceptional weakness aside – having remained decent has hardened us... All in all, we may say that we have accomplished the most difficult task out of love for our people. And we have not suffered any damage to our inner self, our soul and our character. (Friedländer 25)

Full of pomposity and second-rate rhetoric, the words herald the death of millions of people. An extreme evil is erected to the status of a mission that cannot be avoided. The speaker assumes that the unprecedented plan of killing every member of one ethnic group will have no impact on the integrity of

German soldiers. However, the most significant aspect of this harangue is its insistence on keeping everything secret. Himmler informs his audience that the planned annihilation of the Jews is “the most glorious page in our history, [yet] one not written and which never shall be written” (Friedländer 25). Obviously, the endeavor to put a shroud of silence on the conspiracy was dictated mostly by pragmatism. But the words, unintentionally, were prophetic and now exemplify a somewhat difficult relation between the Holocaust and the act of recording it in a written form. Even the perpetrators were perfectly aware of this. The analogical uncertainty also concerns the testimonies of the survivors. The experience of the genocide cast a shadow of doubt on the credibility of language.

The eternal dilemmas of representation are aptly given a somewhat paradoxical “expression” in W. H. Auden’s long poem *The Sea and the Mirror*: “[the artist,] in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged” (442). For objective reasons, immediate access to the truth of the Holocaust is beyond our abilities. There is no way to bridge the time gap. The postwar generation (to which the author of *Maus* belongs) cannot remember the destruction of Jews during WWII; instead, the descendants of the victims and survivors are exposed to innumerable texts, photographs, movies, video testimonies. Accordingly, rather than trying to attain the unmediated experience, Spiegelman decided to give us a necessarily hyper-mediated visualization of the memory of events – to build up a new communication channel across the gap.

The uniqueness of Spiegelman’s book lies in fact that, as Michael E. Staub asserts it “is much more accessible to a general audience than many other accounts” and “because it is particularly effective at inviting emotional involvement” (33). However, this apparent accessibility should not be mistaken for oversimplification of the Jewish genocide – the author did not conceive his comic book with the prospect of achieving a commercial goal; neither did he intend to sketch a pictorial synopsis of the event that claimed millions of victims. At first it may seem that by drawing on oral testimony (of his father, Vladek Spiegelman) and applying a documentary strategy, Spiegelman created, paradoxically, a rather conventional tale. Staub sees *Maus* as: “part of a larger tradition in twentieth century minority and ethnic literature: narratives that rely on the immediacy and authority of oral encounters with members of persecuted and oppressed groups in order to counter ‘official versions’ of history that marginalize or even deny these groups’ experiences and

perspective” (34). However, the conventionality of *Maus* and its supposedly ethnic character are merely masks that cover a very sophisticated and subtle artistic strategy.

The book simultaneously develops two time perspectives and sustains two, often not entirely reliable, narrative viewpoints. The embedded Holocaust narrative is framed by the present-day depiction of the book-making by Art. Traditionally, structuring a literary work in such a way hid the authorial intention to introduce an element of ambiguity about the narrator’s reliability or to play with the expectations of the readers. In the case of *Maus*, however, the presence of the framing narrative for the one nestled within it is meant to demonstrate the unavoidable dilemma of representing the painful process of recollecting the Holocaust. After all, recording truth is forever susceptible to falsification or deformity. But, instead of tracing the elusive distinctions between the “objective” and the “subjective,” Vladek’s story recorded by his son turns its incompleteness and partiality into an undeniable asset – the awareness of being doomed to halfway conclusions. And locating one’s own subjectivity at the centre of the tale (Art Spiegelman is both the author and a character) is an act of honesty. Seen in this light, Staub’s strong assertion that “*Maus* is very much about the inability of art (or Art) to confront fully or represent metaphorically a monstrous past” (37) is perhaps a bit far-fetched.

A problem arises when we ask ourselves whether visualizing horrible memories approximates the authority of the oral, i.e. unmediated, tale. Drawing himself as *the one who draws the story presented to the reader* was not, it seems, satisfactory to Spiegelman, as recently he has decided to publish the original recordings of his father’s voice. In fact, these days *Maus* is not merely a comic book, but, with the publication of *MetaMaus* (in 2011), a multi-media ongoing project; a hybrid impossible to be contained within any definite borders of a genre. The authorial commentaries, the recordings, the rough sketches, the material not included, and the comic strip itself enter together in dialogue with each other, opening new interpretative venues, re-contextualizing the whole, and thus symbolically approaching the give-and-take nature of the oral tale.

Spiegelman’s choice of anthropomorphized animals as the stylistic/aesthetic trademark of his work may, it seems, be elucidated in myriad ways which, put together, reveal a most expected, logical, if not most fitting, strategy. According to Staub, the animal mask problematizes the possibility of translating Jewish identity (and, let us add, *any* ethnic identity) “into any one static sign” (38). On the most obvious plane, human beings depicted as animals symbolically evoke not only the scale of degradation and de-humanization of the Ho-

locust victims but the inhumanity of the perpetrators. Images of mice being chased by cats, an idea which at first appears to be verging on the brink of banality and commonplace, are supplemented with analogical representations of Polish pigs, Gypsy moths, Swedish reindeer or French frogs.

But such a representation of ethnicity is not merely the effect of (temporarily) taking for granted the label enforced on the disadvantaged group by the "superior" one. True, the major metaphor of Jews as vermin unfolds under the auspices of Hitler's judgment that they "are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" (*Maus* 10), but this ruthless and humiliating categorization is subject to subtle yet significant subversion. A hardly irrelevant inconsistency can be observed in the way the mouse image of Jews appears on the pages of the book: the Jews are "fully" anthropomorphized mice and they have as if no awareness of themselves not being human beings; but, at the same time, some of them don pig masks to give the impression of being gentiles, e. g. the scene when Vladek and Anja are desperately trying to escape the Nazis without rousing suspicion (*Maus* 138). Only some of the mice have tails, and this "attribute" appears and disappears from one frame to another with a seeming unpredictability, or as if as a result of the author's oversight. In *Maus II*, "Auschwitz (Time Flies)," Artie, a now celebrated maker of a bestselling comic book on the Holocaust, the journalists harassing him for an interview, and Artie's shrink, Pavel (himself a survivor of Terezin and Auschwitz) are all shown as human beings hiding their faces behind animal masks. All these "inconsistencies" taken together point to the problem of essentialist assumptions about ethnic identities. Spiegelman demonstrates "how reductive it is to associate people with only one facet of their 'identity'; it also highlights the way individuals *choose* whether, or how, to present an ethnic identity to the world" (Staub, 38). Thus, the representation of human beings as animals (that still *are* human beings) both unveils and deplores the workings of racism.

*Maus*, in its very technical aspect, constitutes an aesthetic manifesto, an artistic gesture, a deliberate decision to find a graphic quality well-suited to a confrontation with the Holocaust. Both the medium itself and the unique realization of the idea of a comic book (a set of black and white panels that give the impression of being merely preparatory sketches) about Jewish mice relate to Nazism and subtly demonstrate the kitsch that permeates the ideology that is being harshly criticized. But this can only be seen against the much broader backdrop of Nazi art. Nazism was not only a phenomenon of military and political history but also an "aesthetic stance" (Doherty 72). Spiegelman's taking issue with the totalitarian aesthetics becomes more than obvious if we consider the extent to which visuality was used to spread Nazi-approved val-

ues in the 1930s. Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda movies, *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938), are cases in point here. The former, chronicling the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, is interspersed with footages of a mass of Hitler Youth parading before the Führer in an act of sheer bravado saturated with an almost religious fervor. The eagles and swastikas carried by these "superhumans" bring to mind the well-drilled Roman Legions of antiquity. The famous opening sequence of the latter is a panning shot of the Acropolis of Athens with the camera meandering through the colonnade of the majestic Parthenon. Superimposed on this scene are numerous images of ancient Greek marble sculptures with prominence given to the Diskobolus of Myron. The well-proportioned nude body captured at the moment of stasis just before the release gradually dissolves into a real discus thrower. It is a meaningful moment of the movie – the Greek ideal of human perfection finds its resumption in the contemporary German athlete taking part in the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936.

*Maus's* indebtedness to the medium of cinema is symbolically signaled in yet another way. While telling the story of life in pre-war Częstochowa, Vladek is busy pedaling on his exercise bicycle. He boastfully informs his son that at the time he was often compared to Rudolph Valentino (*Maus* 15). The panel includes a "mice pastiche" of the original poster advertising Valentino's legendary motion picture "Sheik." As Andreas Huyssen remarks: "the whole exercise bicycle mechanism remotely looks like a movie projector with the spinning wheel resembling a film reel" (70-71). The story then is "projected" – the laboriously uncovered past events enter the narrative, sequential order of a yarn. In no way do the hideously grotesque characters of this projected story resemble the impeccable torsos and compelling faces in Riefenstahl's documentaries.

In *Maus* the Nazi rhetoric of beautiful might is turned topsy-turvy. Reconstructing the lost world of his parents, Spiegelman not only overtly deforms human beings, but sketches them using only two basic colors. Black lines drawn on white pages, however, generate a 'message' that is far from being simple, minimalistic, or lacking nuances. All the panels that went into the book retain the original size they were sketched in; consequently, instead of refined or beautified pictures, we are given as if a rough draft which "reproduces [the author's] hand's movement in scale – its shakiness, the thickness of his pencil" (Young 673). (This, however, should not be perceived as Spiegelman's intent to underpin his work's immediacy – *Maus* is by no means a spontaneous creation but the selection of innumerable "takes" or attempts to grasp the essence of experience).

As an American artist dealing with the problem of racism and racial caricatures, Spiegelman may be perceived as the inventor of the graphic equivalent of a kind of blackface minstrel show, with one proviso, of course – that we agree on the close affinity between the mouse mask (“Jewface”) and blackface. Written by white and black song sketch writers, minstrel songs and sketches were performed by whites blacked up as blacks, and sometimes in later years, by blacks blacked up as whites-playing-blacks. On the surface, they seemed to reinforce ugly racial stereotypes. Minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment for about eighty years in the United States, beginning in the 1840s, and portrayed the life of slaves through mostly English-styled songs and the representations of the broken language of the day. This inaccuracy of the portrayal of African Americans was quite revealing about the American culture at the time – a time when the boundaries of color divided the people. Despite its overt racism, a blackface minstrel show was a blend of lively music, knock-about comedy, and sophisticated elegance. A bizarre and complicated ritual in which blacks and whites alike would interpret and misinterpret each other.

Blackface was truly popularized in the late 1820s by Thomas D. Rice performing the song “Jump Jim Crow,” and this eponymous character later gave the name to a set of regulations reinstating segregation and discrimination of black Americans. In the 1850s, bridging the gap between strictly codified “high” art (such as opera) and mass audience, blackface minstrel shows acquired the status of American national art (Gołębiowski 194). The appeal of this aesthetics was soon taken advantage of in different media. For example, if we consider the earliest period of American cinematography, with such titles as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (the first adaptation made in 1903) or the highly-controversial *Birth of the Nation* (1915), we notice that African American characters are played by white actors in blackface. The reasons for cartoons such as *The Isle of Pingo Pongo* (1938) or *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943) being considered unacceptably offensive, and as a consequence temporarily suppressed from TV broadcast, are their “darkey” iconography (featuring silly characters drawn with ridiculously big eyes, tiny noses, and unnaturally enlarged pink lips that bring to mind white people in blackface rather than genuine black ones) and racist humor.

Clichés and crude associations that were actualized in the stock characters of blackface minstrels would typically lead to the strengthening of the racist stereotypes (i.e. thinking of blacks as pathological liars and thieves, lazybones and buffoons who notoriously and mercilessly mutilate the English language), but at the same time they resulted in the increasing dissemination and popularity of black culture (although this was done through a distorting prism).



But why, we can ask, would one accept the humiliating terms of reference (“dandified coon,” “happy-go-lucky ducky on the plantation,” etc.) in the pre- and post-abolition minstrelsy? Perhaps originally blackface channeled whites’ fear of the unknown and was a way of domesticating the unfamiliar. As Eric Lott asserts the “black mask offered a way to play with the collective fears of a degraded and threatening – and male – Other while at the same time maintain some symbolic control over them” (25). This logic of safeguarding control over an Other can be reversed, namely in the figure of a black performer acting as a white-pretending-to-be-black. Such performances were not rare, especially after the abolition of slavery, and, as it seems, they made it possible for black artists to gain and keep the upper hand over the dominating agency of whites (Gołębiowski 193). Admittedly, there is a significant difference between a white blackface performer who blackens his skin with burnt cork, greasepaint or shoe polish, exaggerates his lips and puts on a woolly wig, and a black artist who decides to do exactly the same. In the first case, white blackface amounts to the appropriation and exploitation of African American cultural identity; in the second, it is a rather sly means of subverting the cultural supremacy of white people, or, better still, the acceptance of discriminating rules of the game in order to demonstrate its (the game’s) ridiculousness.

Which takes us back to the figure of a Jew as vermin in *Maus*. Drawing analogies between the phenomenon of blackface and *Maus*, we notice that both are artistic responses to ethnically-based stereotypes and blatantly racial caricatures. Similarly, both blackface minstrelsy in the nineteenth century and comic strips in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries enjoyed a comparatively massive popularity. Spiegelman once said that that “*Maus* was made in collaboration with Hitler” (“Drawing Pens and Politics” 46), and that his mice bear a resemblance to anti-Semitic Jew-as-rat cartoons published in *Der Stürmer*, a notorious anti-Semitic weekly edited by Hitler’s early ardent supporter, Julius Streicher. The idea of likening Jews to vermin or serpents on the front pages of *Der Stürmer* was further exploited in Nazi propaganda films made during WWII, notably Fritz Hippler’s *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*) from 1940. Spiegelman made use of the caricature invented by the Nazis and “perfidiously” changed it into a weapon against them.

But political cartoons were by no means created only by the perpetrators. Nor were they always informed by a malicious or hostile tinge. Interestingly enough, political cartoons had accompanied the world of Nazi concentration camps from the very beginning. However shocking it may sound today, there is sufficient evidence for the claim that the policy of racial discrimination

did not deprive the Jews and other victims of humor, ironic attitude toward the oppressors, and – last but not least – cathartic self-irony. The works of Hans Queck, George Sreitwolf and Karl Schwesig provide the best examples (Feinstein 165). Queck, a Dachau camp prisoner, made an effort to depict the dehumanizing, atrocious conditions in which the inmates were forced to live – one of his cartoons features an emaciated man in an act of stealing dog food. Sreitwolf is remembered for producing unique greeting cards from Mauthausen. Schwesig, a non-Jewish German artist who for political reasons spent most of the war-time in the Vichy camps in France, is the author of mini-cartoons in the form of postage stamps that constitute a kind of “barbed wire” triptych mockingly entitled *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. If we remember this, Spiegelman ceases to be the one who blazed the trail of utterly new, revolutionary ways of telling Holocaust tales; instead, he becomes part of a certain (often undervalued, if not forgotten) tradition of concentration camp humor, or, better still, of a sense of the comic in the face of adversity.

The literature about the Holocaust consists in permanent attempts to multiply patterns of possible narratives and forms, in finding a language that would approximate the essence of the atrocious experience. One may ask if such a language exists at all, and if the literature of the Holocaust can be defined in any definite terms. In other words, our culture has been informed by two basic doubts: is it possible to write about the Holocaust at all, and, if the answer is “yes”, is it decorous? While the first dilemma stems from the conviction that the mass extermination defies any adequate figuration, the second draws on morality and warns against any representation that would (purposefully or inadvertently) turn the tragedy into something aesthetically “attractive,” i.e. appealing to primitive instincts of the audience that expects to be entertained irrespective of the subject matter. Both doubts are the evidence of the same conviction that Holocaust literature should be assessed by means of one benchmark only – the truth. Thus this attitude demands the strict and unconditional correspondence between what happened and the text written about what happened.

However, such thinking takes at least two things for granted – it presupposes the existence of a language that is “transparent,” and it implies the possibility of a literary style that is absolutely immune to conventions (and, of course, even a purely documentary style is not pure). This, in our “post-modern,” “disillusioned” world, seems to be wishful thinking, a mere utopia. However hard one tries, identification of the borderline that divides literary and figurative language turns out to be impossible. Style and composition are constitutional features not only of literature but of any text – literariness is



unavoidable. In the fragment of *Sea and the Mirror* that I quote at the beginning of my article, Auden convinces us that the conventional nature of literature (or any art for that matter) does not take away from its credibility. On the contrary, it enables the communication between the writer and the reader. The readers of *Maus* remain fully conscious that while reading about the Holocaust, they gain access to a certain subjective recollection of the events and *not* to the ultimate truth about the events.

One of the final pages of *Maus II* features an authentic snapshot of Vladek Spiegelman embedded into comic frames – black and white, but professionally focused, it depicts a young, healthy-looking man in a characteristic grey-striped uniform, and may easily pass for a passport or ID photo. As the reader learns, it was taken in Germany after the war, in a souvenir shop. This detail, which more often than not is overlooked or at least not given proper consideration, is a virtual aesthetic “glitch” in the whole: “Amid the rough lines of Spiegelman’s comic book art, the snapshot on film seems pallid and duplicitous. The true picture of this survivor’s tales is in the cartoons” (Doherty 82). *Maus* defines itself both against the aesthetics of perfection and the aesthetics of realistic representation. The high-definition realism loses in the confrontation with the low-definition figuration based upon a rather simple chiaroscuro. Last but not least, by drawing our attention to the very fact that such “Auschwitz” souvenirs were fabricated for commercial purposes, Spiegelman tells us how easily the unprecedented event of Jewish genocide can be trivialized (and depreciated) as pop-culture commodity.

### Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.
- Doherty, Thomas. “Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust.” *American Literature* 68.1 (1996): 69-84. Print.
- Feinstein, Stephen C. “Art After Auschwitz.” *Problems Unique to the Holocaust*. Ed. Harry James Cargas. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999. 152 – 168. Print.
- Friedländer, Saul. “The ‘Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Interpretation.” *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World*. Ed. Peter Hayes. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991, 23-35. Print.
- Gołębiowski, Marek. *Dzieje kultury Stanów Zjednoczonych*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004. Print.
- Huyssen, Andreas. “Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno.” *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. Ed. Barbie Zelizer. Piscataway: Rutgers, 2001. 28-43. Print.

- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. "Drawing Pens and Politics: Mightier Than the Sorehead." *The Nation*, 17 January 1994: 46. Print.
- Young, James E. "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History." *Critical Inquiry* 24.3 (1998): 666-699. Print.