The Memory and Legacy of Trauma in Art Spiegelman's Maus
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The Memory and Legacy of Trauma in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

“*Historical understanding is like a vision, or rather like an evocation of images*”¹

Amongst the plethora of Holocaust literature, monuments, films, documentaries, and exhibitions, Art Spiegelman’s graphical representation of the Holocaust and its memory in *Maus* I and II is one of the most poignant, striking, and creative. Groundbreaking in his approach, Spiegelman reinterprets and expands both the comic form and traditional mediums of telling history to express and relate the history of his survivor-father. Spiegelman also explores and addresses the burden and legacy of traumatic memory on second-generation survivors. Interweaving a variety of genres, characterizations, temporalities, and themes, *Maus* depicts the process of, and Spiegelman’s relationship to, remembrance through a combination of images and text.

This paper situates Spiegelman’s work within the framework of second-generation Holocaust literature and post-memory, and will discuss the debate regarding Spiegelman’s representation of the memory process and the Holocaust in the comic medium, along with his use of animal characters instead of humans. Moreover, the essay will critically analyze and enumerate the various themes within *Maus* such as the relation between past and present and the recording of memory. Ultimately, this piece seeks to examine the efficacy and success of Spiegelman’s use of the comic medium in memorializing the Holocaust.

Divided into two texts (*Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*² and *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*³), *Maus* narrates the story of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman, two survivors of

Auschwitz who resettle in Queens, New York. Art, their son, records his father’s memories in a series of oral interviews. The story primarily chronicles Vladek’s life from 1930s Poland until the end of the Second World War. In great detail, the memoir recounts his courtship and marriage to Anja; his rise in business in the Polish town of Sosnowiec; his time in the Polish Army and his subsequent capture and release by the Nazis in 1939; his plans and strategies to hide with Anja to avoid being sent to the camps; and his experience in Auschwitz. More broadly, Vladek’s account traces the transition of the position of Jews in Poland through the implementation and practice of the Third Reich’s anti-Semitic policies. Interchanging between past and present and full of self-reflexivity, the narrative simultaneously records Vladek’s post-Holocaust life in America, Art’s childhood, and the present relationship between father and son.

The Trauma of the Second-Generation

*Maus* is part of a larger body of second-generation Holocaust literature. Children of Holocaust survivors grew up with the simultaneous presence and absence of Holocaust memory in their daily lives. As Anne Karpf acknowledges, “It seemed then as if I hadn’t lived the central experience of my life—at its heart, at mine, was an absence.”

*Maus* portrays how these children, such as Art, possess a distinct sense of bearing an unlived trace of the Holocaust past within the present. As a result of being strongly marked by its legacy, many from the second generation construct their identity in relation to the Holocaust, exploring it through imaginative writing and

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art, attempting to fill and restore the gaps created by this incomprehensible void. Marianne Hirsch terms this effort as reflective of “post-memory,” the second generation’s response to the trauma inherited from their parents. Hirsch argues that “post-memory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection, but through representation, projection, and creation.”

James E. Young aptly notes that, since the majority of survivor-children were born after the Holocaust in the time of its memory, they only seek to represent their knowledge and experience of these events that were learned through, and mediated by, its transmission. Concerned less with certainty and historical truth, “post memorial writing employs narrative to acknowledge the impossibility of fully grasping what happened, even as it ventures to construct a story about the Holocaust.” The work of the second-generation thus illustrates a process of dual and distanced memory: “instead of trying to remember events, they recall their relationship to the memory of events…It becomes memory of a witness’s memory.”

*Maus*, in its entirety, explores and records this act of dual memory, as Art recounts the situations in which his father’s memories are conveyed. According to Erin McGlothlin, post-memorial work performs a crucially double role by recording the personal and historical trauma caused by the Holocaust, and by facilitating the rehabilitation of the second generation to its unlived past. At a certain point, Art lives through and recalls the effects his father’s memories have on him: for example, in the opening scene of the first installment, Vladek, instead of

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7 Ibid, 9.
8 McGlothlin, 11.
10 McGlothlin, 11.
comforting his son after his friends leave him, cynically remarks that friends are fickle and untrustworthy.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, \textit{Maus} is part of second-generation literature that strives to both learn about the influence of the first generation’s past on their present, and to work through and comprehend their relationship and identity in the context of this traumatic and absent past.

**The Perceived “Impropriety” of Comic Representation**

There has been great debate regarding ‘appropriate’ representations of memorializing the Holocaust. Although there is widespread consensus that the Holocaust should be remembered by as many as possible, mass cultural representations are generally regarded as improper and incorrect.\textsuperscript{12} Elie Wiesel argues that “there is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust” and T.W. Adorno, echoing Wiesel, strongly states that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”\textsuperscript{13} Within this view then, it is nearly impossible to aesthetically capture or represent the evil of the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews; anything that attempts to appropriate the trauma is ‘barbaric.’ Since comics are commonly viewed as trivial,\textsuperscript{14} such an endeavor by Spiegelman to represent the Holocaust might appear to Adorno, Wiesel and others as grotesquely comedic, mocking, and derogatory: to assimilate the Holocaust into daily structures of thought and to attempt to understand the unimaginable through mass cultural forms is akin to accepting the Jewish genocide as one historical event among many.

However, Spiegelman’s creative and risky move to combine image and text to relate a complex and fraught private oral history does not trivialize the Holocaust; instead, it reflects a

\textsuperscript{11} Spiegelman, \textit{Maus I}, Appendix I, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{13} Wiesel and Adorno as quoted in Joseph Witek, \textit{Comic Books as History} (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press 1989), 97.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}
break from earlier understandings of literature and representation. Through his complex narrative images, “Spiegelman transgresses the sacredness of Auschwitz by depicting…his survivor father’s suffering.” In doing so, Spiegelman resists repeating what has already been seen, while still existing within a textual re-presentation of familiar history. By discussing the Holocaust, Spiegelman also reinterprets and heightens the commonly low position of the comic medium into a form that is highly expressive, multi-faced, critical, and psychologically layered.

Within *Maus* itself, Spiegelman addresses the daunting enormity of his portrayal of memory and the Holocaust. In discussing the creation of *Maus II*, Spiegelman admits to feeling “so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams…and trying to do it as a comic strip…there’s so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize.” By addressing the extensiveness of such a project, Spiegelman indicates the difficulty of his undertaking to provide an ‘authentic’ representation. For Spiegelman to transform memories that he has not experienced into words and images – and in a medium that is traditionally considered as humorous – was a daunting task, given the subjective and distortive potential inherent within memory, which further exacerbates an attempt at historical truth.

Against these barriers however, Spiegelman relentlessly tries to establish order and accuracy. He consistently attempts to have Vladek provide specific physical and emotional details about his experiences in order to reify the memory and make clear the chronology of the complicated process of classification, segregation, deportation, and extermination by the Nazis.

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16 Young, 675.
18 Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, 84 and 228
Spiegelman conducted extensive research to corroborate and ‘materialize’ the words of his father by consulting diagrams, photographs, and historical records.\textsuperscript{19} Spiegelman also went to great effort to ensure the authenticity of Vladek’s transcribed voice by including the heavily accented \textit{shtetl} effect of Vladek’s narrative.\textsuperscript{20} In so doing, Spiegelman undertakes and achieves the role of an oral historian in synthesizing historical knowledge with invaluable and insightful testimony.

Although historically relevant, the Holocaust is secondary to Spiegelman’s concern of both recording the process of memory and of understanding his relationship with his father. Spiegelman does not aim to report about a verifiable event, but strives to create a version of what was remembered.\textsuperscript{21} Consequently, history is relegated as influential background to \textit{Maus}’s examination of memory and relationships. Spiegelman clarifies that “\textit{Maus} is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father’s story…[It is] an autobiographical history of my relationship with my father, a survivor of the Nazi death camps.”\textsuperscript{22} Echoing this sentiment, Young adds that, “‘What happened at Auschwitz’ is important historically; indeed it is the substance of Vladek’s narrative; but the implication here is that the father’s story is important because of its effects on the son, and not because of ‘what happened at Auschwitz.’”\textsuperscript{23} Young acknowledges that memory, while identifiable with history, concerns itself with something other than historical accuracy. The memory of the Holocaust, in order to

\textsuperscript{19} Brown, 98.
\textsuperscript{20} Rothberg, 671.
\textsuperscript{22} Young, 670.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 699.
communicate the reality of an unimaginable occurrence, must employ figures and metaphors that transcend the confining boundaries of fact.  

Although *Maus* does not present itself to be a record of history, it does register and corroborate historical fact such as the liquidation of Jewish businesses before the war, forced ghettoization, the aid of Jewish leaders in Nazi deportations, the conditions—physical and political—within Auschwitz, and the possibilities of resistance. Ultimately however, *Maus* avoids trivializing the Holocaust and is a successful work of history because it presents the story in its entirety. Spiegelman does not hide his betrayal of excluding the story of Vladek’s earlier relationship with Lucia; he does not present his father as a heroic survivor; and he does not attempt to center *Maus* on a morally uplifting ideal of hope and preservation or happy reconciliation. The bluntness and failure to provide the reader with a catharsis avoids the construction of “knowing” and “understanding” the Holocaust.

**Mice, Cats, Pigs, and Dogs: The Use of Animal Characters**

Spiegelman’s conscious employment of animal characters in *Maus* has been controversial and criticized by many who argue that it casts the significance of the Holocaust as commonplace and comedic. Spiegelman justifies his use of the animal imagery as a necessary method to retain authenticity and over-sympathetic sentiment:

> First of all, I’ve never been through anything like that…and it would be counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that’s actually happening. I don’t know what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing…I’m bound to do something

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inauthentic. Also I’m afraid that if I did it with people, it would be very corny. It would out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy…and that wasn’t my point.28 By depicting the characters as animals, Spiegelman de-familiarizes and eludes the ‘already told’ quality of the Holocaust story. In drawing the Jews as mice, the Nazis as cats, the Poles as pigs, and the Americans as dogs, Spiegelman also avoids the over-determination of meaning that would occur from human imagery.29 The use of animal imagery also enables Spiegelman “to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them”30 in order to maintain the focus on the relationship between characters and memory.

Other critics argue that the use of animals distracts and distances the reader from the main story and its characters. However the imagery becomes secondary to the interactions of the narrative. Due to his simple drawings of the animals and their strongly human characterizations, one begins to identify the characters as human rather than animal. One only becomes consciously aware of the anthropomorphic figures when Spiegelman purposefully draws the animal-face as a mask, and when he suddenly includes the human-drawn characters of “Prisoner on the Hell Planet.”31 These disruptions not only force the reader out of complacency, but also compel the reader to decipher and question the constructed notion that these ‘persons’ are regarded as different species. In this way, Spiegelman gestures to the arbitrariness and divisiveness of such racial conceptions. Spiegelman argues that “to use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it’s really a much more direct way of dealing with the material.”32 The characters’ lack of acknowledgment of their

28 Quoted in Huyssen, 75.
29 Witek, 103.
30 Quoted in Young, 687.
32 Huyssen, 75.
‘animal’ quality when juxtaposed with actual animals suggests that the imagery, though important, forms the background to the rest of the narrative: instead of defining the narrative, the images facilitate it.33 Moreover, the ignorance of the characters also implies that one’s identity is subjectively figured by perspective, both by the individual and by the recognition of this identity by others. For example, when Vladek wears a pig mask (projecting a particular identity), the other Polish pigs recognize him as such.34

Spiegelman’s metaphor of cats and mice is powerful and contentious. The initial premise of this polarized characterization effectively presents the power relations between the Nazis and the Jews, and suggests the predatory nature of the Nazi oppression. Yet some argue that this metaphor naturalizes the acting out of ‘natural’ roles (i.e. it is commonly understood that it is natural for the bigger cats to attack the weaker mice). 35 This metaphor however does not extend to grant moral absolution to either side, as evidenced in the ambiguous and fluid roles of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ (further discussion of this will follow). The Jews and Nazis are only mice and cats in relation to each other in a particular context; the metaphor is not a literal characterization, but rather a conception of unequal human relations. The metaphor may also point to the dehumanization of victims that can lead to genocide; conversely, it may comment on the Nazi animalistic and inhumane behaviour.36

Throughout Maus, the animal characters serve to comment and undermine the idea of racial theory. Placed at the beginning of the first volume, Hitler’s statement that “the Jews are

33 Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, 149.
34 Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, 151.
35 Witek, 112.
36 Staub, 37.
undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” is realized and contradicted within *Maus*. As mentioned earlier, though Spiegelman avoids depicting any character as human, he imbues the characters with human emotions and thought-processes so that the reader identifies and perceives them as the embodiment and performance of humanness. His animal rendering of these characters reveals the irrationality and artifice of Hitler’s claims. In *Maus II*, in a moment of self-reflexivity, Spiegelman directly addresses the this arbitrariness of depicting the characters as animals. Art’s difficulty in deciding how he should draw his wife, a Frenchwoman and former Gentile, illustrates the constructed and arbitrary interpretation of, and relation between, identity, nationality, and ethnicity. The creativity of the animal imagery and metaphor thus does not trivialize the Holocaust, but points to the deeper meanings and reverberations within *Maus*.

**Memory in Maus**

Through the balance of image and text, Spiegelman’s *Maus* conveys a variety of intersecting and influential meanings and perceptions of the Holocaust. More than simply telling a story or creating a biographical account, *Maus* depicts the process of transmitting and recording memory. Throughout the text, Spiegelman aims to portray the permeability and pliancy of memory by including the digressions and nuances of daily life that intrude upon and influence it. Art, focused more on his father’s telling of the story, pays little attention to these diversions (although the fact that they are recorded indicate their importance and role as constituting part of the procedure of remembering). At some points Art becomes distraught with these deviations, screaming in one scene, “ENOUGH…TELL ME ABOUT AUSCHWITZ!”

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These shifts in thought and discussion capture the sense of an interview shaped by a father and son’s tense relationship.

By including the practice of recording Vladek’s account, *Maus* also demonstrates how memory is not based on definitive fact, but rather part of a constitutive process. Remembering is thus not merely a recall of occurrences, but instead involves the construction of the past.\(^{40}\) The representation addresses the dual and co-productive nature of knowledge and narrative:

What is generated in the interaction between father and son…is not a revelation of a story already existing, waiting to be told, but a new story unique to their experience together. This medium allows the artist to show not only the creation of his father’s story but the necessary grounds for its creation, the ways his father’s story hinges on his relationship to the listener\(^ {41}\) Hence image or word alone cannot convey the dual process of memory-generation:

Spiegelman achieves a mixture of picture and text that reflects and makes visible the mutually constructive relationship between teller and listener in the recounting and subsequent understanding and depiction of the narrative.

Throughout *Maus*, Art grapples with determining the proper methods to illustrate and capture historical memories that are horrible, necessary, and contentious. Art’s continuous search for his deceased mother’s diaries of the Holocaust, along with the devastating realization that they have been destroyed is pivotal. The metaphor points to the difficulty present in recovering all narratives of both the Holocaust and other traumatic events.\(^ {42}\) The eighth chapter of the series, captioned as “Time Flies,” further elaborates on the sense that, because of the limited amount of

\(^{40}\) Brown, 95.

\(^{41}\) Young, 676.

time, there is the inherent danger that memories will pass to the realm of the forgotten if they remain silent. Interpretation of and insight into history then are not merely constituted in ‘objective’ facts and documents, but in the recorded memories, experiences, and perceptions of contemporary individuals.

As part of Maus’s portrayal of remembrance, Spiegelman strives to illustrate, figuratively and literally, the ways in which the present is continuously constituted, shaped, and imbued with the past. According to Dominic LaCapra, “the past not only interacts with, but erupts into, the present, and at times the present seems to be only a function of, or a diaphanous screen for, the past.” The notion and images of “past” and “present” are not clearly marked in Maus, but instead intimately interwoven on many different levels. In the second volume, as Vladek recounts the procedure of Selektionen, he physically demonstrates and re-enacts the past in the present by turning to “FACE LEFT” just as he was ordered to by the Nazis. Spiegelman pictorially reproduces this moment with an abrupt transition in the last panel to Vladek performing the same action in the past. At the beginning of Maus II, past and present are spatially combined. A territorial map of New York intrudes upon a pictorial layout of the Auschwitz camp. In the foreground, situated between both images, is Vladek, depicted simply in his concentration camp stripes. The entire representation indicates the extent to which Vladek’s character is formed by both his past and present. The prison-like stripes also indicate how Vladek, even after the Holocaust, is trapped and shaped by his memory of it. The bearing of the

43 Ibid, 42.
45 Spiegelman, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, 218.
47 Spiegelman, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, 166.
past upon the present is more subtly indicated by the visual foregrounding of symbols of the past. For example, Vladek is situated in front of Art when he is riding the stationary bicycle.\textsuperscript{48} In one panel of this scene, Vladek’s Auschwitz tattoo is clearly visible and almost obstructs the reader’s view of Art,\textsuperscript{49} indicating the extent to which the father’s past ‘bleeds’ into the son’s present.\textsuperscript{50}

Similarly, the present frames the need to understand the past. Thematically, the memoir of Vladek begins not with his own story, but with the story of Art’s experience as an inheritor and secondary victim of, and witness to, traumatic memory.\textsuperscript{51} This reiterates that \textit{Maus} is not about the Holocaust specifically, but about the relationship of memory to the Holocaust and its relationship to the present. The collapse of temporal space in \textit{Maus} demonstrates and reinforces a dual perception: the first is that memory and history are not exclusively divorced and objective entities—both inform and consolidate the other; the second is that both memory and history have no definable beginning, middle, or end—one’s story is continuous and fluid. This conveyance of memory and history is heightened through the combined use of image and text; it would not be as apparent or powerful if represented in any other form. \textit{Maus} then, embodies William Faulkner’s statement that “the past is not dead and buried; in fact, it is not even past:”\textsuperscript{52} the past is part of the present and the present is part of the understanding of the past. Consequently, Spiegelman demonstrates that both his own identity and that of his father are compounded by the memories they share and hold.

\textbf{The Complication of the ‘Survivor’}

\textsuperscript{48} Spiegelman, \textit{Maus: A Survivor’s Tale}, 14.
\textsuperscript{49} Spiegelman, \textit{Maus I}, 12.
\textsuperscript{50} Costello, 31.
\textsuperscript{51} Young, 678.
\textsuperscript{52} William Faulkner, \textit{Requiem for a Nun} (New York: Random House, 1951), 45.
Spiegelman’s project seeks to dispel and problematize the image of the archetypal Holocaust survivor to suggest something more complex and multi-layered. Vladek’s survival is never sentimentalized nor is the tension between father and son muted. The troubled filial bond and generational disconnect climaxes when Art harshly accuses his father of murder for destroying Anja’s diaries.\(^53\) *Maus* not only implies that the image of the forever hopeful, perseverant, and optimistic “survivor” is misguided, but also suggests that such a past can have psychologically negative effects on the identity of the parent and child. Epitomized in the most jarringly emotional and personal episode of *Maus*, entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History, Art articulates, through image and word, the burden he carries of this distant, unlived, and influential, past.\(^54\) His donning of concentration camp clothing throughout the piece and his depiction behind prison bars symbolically connects and emphasizes the trauma and legacy of the Holocaust.\(^55\)

The memory of the Holocaust touches upon and victimizes multiple generations so that the story of *Maus* is not about one survivor or one level of survival, but instead about the varied layers and contradictory exemplifications of ‘survivor’ and ‘survival.’ Spiegelman demonstrates the relativity and ambiguity of the role of perpetrator and victim. While Vladek is a victim at the hands of the Nazis and a survivor of the Holocaust, in the eyes of young Art, the father becomes a perpetrator of violence and miserliness. Similarly, Art imagines himself as victim of his father’s memory and experience. In one scene, Art’s psychiatrist observes that Art is “the REAL

\(^{54}\) Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, 102-105.  
\(^{55}\) Staub, 40.
The roles begin to blur and shift however as Art, in his search to learn the story of his parents becomes harsh, impatient, and interrogative towards his father. As suggested by the title of the first volume, Vladek, for a second time, transforms into the victim that “bleeds” history, as his son pries open wounds that had long been sewn. Ultimately Maus illustrates how these roles are fluid, relative, and contentious. Spiegelman’s portrayal of his parents and life does not in any way decrease or deny the importance of the survivor; instead Spiegelman adds to and provides insight into the lives and relationships of survivors.

The Immortalization of Memory in Comic: Success or Failure?

The use of the comic medium is highly advantageous and effective in transmitting the memorial narrative of the Holocaust. Defining his style as “commix”—the commixture of words and pictures to tell a story—Spiegelman explains that “the strength of commix lies in [its] ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to human thought than either word or picture alone.”57 This combination of picture and text enables a multiply layered story with varied levels of meaning communicated through the simultaneous movement between word, image, and observation. Spiegelman describes how the story thus “operates somewhere between the words and the idea that’s in the picture and in the movement between pictures, which is the essence of what happens in a comic.”58

Moreover such a process keeps the reader mentally and physically engaged in connecting and understanding the relationship between the text and the images. Spiegelman sought to reduce

56 Spiegelman, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, 204.
57 Young, 672.
58 Brown, 104.
the gap between words and images by creating simpler graphics, explaining, “I didn’t want people to get too interested in the drawings. I wanted them to be there, but the story operates somewhere else...[s]o, by not focusing you too hard on these people you’re forced back into your role as reader rather than looker.” The images aid in the ‘realization’ of Vladek’s words, while the text helps to facilitate and contextualize the illustration. While awkward to portray in prose, the medium permits the diagrammatic representation of territorial maps, hiding places, shore-repairing techniques, and the layouts of the bunker and crematorium. Although Spiegelman presents the particular images created in his mind by Vladek’s testimony, he does so in a way that does not subsume the reader’s imagination but stimulates it; the simple drawings engage the reader in the ‘filling-out’ of the image.

By employing the comic medium to represent the past, Spiegelman reinvents the traditional parameters of the form. The comic is commonly associated with showing the present or future, along with depicting the fantastic and the incredible. Spiegelman appropriates the form so successfully in illustrating real occurrences of the Holocaust that he expands and restructures the traditional comic framework. Since the Holocaust is considered to be an ‘impossible reality,’ it is fitting that a medium regarded as the epitome of the fantastic be used to depict what is unimaginable. Moreover, “by situating a non-fictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, ‘comic’ space, Spiegelman captures the hyper-intensity of Auschwitz.”

59 Ibid.
60 Spiegelman, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, 112, 220, 230.
61 Brown, 104.
62 Banner, 132.
medium thus demands the reader to confront the suffering and obscenity of the Holocaust as visual representation.  

The comic medium also enables a deeper, more comprehensive representation of Vladek’s memories and the process of remembering. The mixture of image and text allows Spiegelman to portray a multi-faceted narrative of the events of the story, its unfolding, and the representation of biography and autobiography in one text. The comic frame also pictorially links the past and present so that they are understood together as one and the same process. Spiegelman notes that comics “are about time being made manifest spatially, in that you’ve got all these different chunks of time—each box being a different moment in time—and you see them all at once. As a result, you’re always…being made aware of different times inhabiting the same space.” The collapsed temporal imagery emphasizes the way in which memory has a layering effect upon chronology so that pasts and presents appear alongside each other. The comic images also serve to reduce the perceived distance between the reader and the events. The depicted memories look recent and thereby become contemporary images to the reader. This further lessens the conception of the Holocaust as ‘past’ or ‘history’ and reinforces the idea of the interwoven relationship between the past and present. At the same time, the panel format of the comic is able to easily differentiate and divide, and subsequently compare, the depictions of two separate temporal levels in a more distinct way than is possible with narrative. Ultimately

64 Rothberg, “We are talking Jewish,” 666.
65 Young, 673.
67 Ibid., 201-202.
68 Banner, 132, 134.
the comic medium is highly successful and effective in illustrating Spiegelman’s ideas about memory and history.

**Beyond Representing a ‘Received History’**

Although Young argues that *Maus* embodies a model of “received history,” it is better understood as a reflection of Saul Friedlander’s proposal for a particular historical narrative that maintains the memory of the Holocaust. Young defines ‘received history’ as “a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us.” While *Maus* does fulfill these criteria, Young hastily relegates it into this category and dismisses it as an actual answer to Friedlander’s call. Friedlander argues for a historiography in which the narrative is disrupted by the historian’s own voice to comment, introduce alternative perspectives, be critical of partial conclusions, and avoid the necessity of closure and catharsis in order to remind readers that history is remembered in context, by a particular person in a specific time and place.

*Maus* successfully achieves all these objectives. Firstly, both volumes include process of self-reflexivity, in which Art the character comments and debates on such matters as how to record Vladek’s testimony or what animal to draw his French, formerly-Gentile wife. This disruption is also evident in the abrupt inclusion of the “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” segment; not only does it engage the reader because of its arbitrary and unexplained placement in the text, but it also serves to disengage the reader from complacency and familiarity while reading *Maus.* Secondly, by providing an alternative and more complexly ambiguous understanding of the ‘survivor,’ the process of historical memory, and the role of the Holocaust, Spiegelman leaves

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69 Young, 669.
70 Friedlander, as summarized by Young, 667-668.
interpretation open to the reader to decipher their own meaning (if any). In so doing, Spiegelman challenges and is critical of partial conclusions that arise from representing the Holocaust through a particular paradigm. Fourthly, Spiegelman’s blunt and honest approach to record the entirety of the relationship between his father, himself, and both their memories of the Holocaust withstands the employment or need for a morally uplifting lesson or meaning. Finally, though *Maus* reflects the process of working-through memory to understand events, Spiegelman makes clear that a certain level of comprehension of such events is impossible. Consequently, *Maus* fulfills Friedlander’s request for a narrative form that integrates ‘common memory’ and ‘deep memory’:71 one that makes events coherent and yet indicates the ultimate incoherence of the victim’s experience.72

Elie Wiesel’s famously posed question, “How does one remember?”73 suggests that, in order for the Holocaust to be secured in history, it must first and foremost be preserved in memory. *Maus* answers this question through its critically insightful immortalization of memory and the Holocaust. Through the commixture of images and words, Spiegelman reinterprets and expands traditional perceptions regarding comics and representations of the Holocaust. Spiegelman skillfully avoids trivializing the Holocaust by interweaving a variety of narrative voices, imagistic styles, and temporalities. *Maus* illustrates the intimate, influential, and mutually constitutive relationship between past and present. In a piece such as this, memory cannot be judged with the same criteria of accuracy, coherency, and analysis which historiography imposes.

71 For Friedlander, ‘common memory’ is that which restores or establishes coherence or closure, while ‘deep memory’ refers to that which remains inarticulate, existing as unresolved trauma beyond meaning 72 Young, 668.

72 Quoted in Alison Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique* 71 (1997), 64.
in its attempt at objectivity, because in the course of remembering, historical facts may be altered, lost, or misinterpreted. However this does not preclude the ability of memory to add to, describe, or provide realism and humanism to the ‘objective’ facts of the tragedy. Moreover, memory offers alternative perspectives and insight to the ‘official’ or general outlook on a historical event. Ultimately, *Maus* is not a fictional comic strip, nor is it an illustrated novel: however unusual the form, it is an important historical work that offers historians a unique approach to narrative construction and interpretation.
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