

ART SPIEGELMAN'S MAUS AS A HOLOCAUST NARRATIVE

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Abstract : Over the years a myriad of Holocaust literature, films, documentaries have emerged and among them Art Spiegelman's graphical representation of the Holocaust in *Maus I and II* is the most striking and creative. Spiegelman has merged words and images like never before and have portrayed the Holocaust with much finesse and expertise. *Maus* portrays the life of Spiegelman's parents, Vladek Spiegelman and Anja Spiegelman and their experience and survival of the Holocaust. This paper focuses on portraying Art Spiegelman's classic as an epitome of Holocaust Narrative.

Introduction

Art Spiegelman is an American Editor and Cartoonist who is most famously known for his Graphic Novel *Maus*. In 1986 Pantheon books collected the first six chapters and published it as a single volume under the title *Maus I : A Survivor's Tale : My Father Bleeds History* and in 1992 the rest of the chapters appeared in the volume title *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. *Maus I* begins with Spiegelman interviewing his father in the Rego Park neighbourhood, where Vladek resided, of New York City in 1978. The story that Vladek tells unfolds in the past, which begins in the mid-1930s and continues until the end of the Holocaust in 1945. Vladek recounted his time in the Polish city Czestochowa and how he married Anja and moved to Sosnowiec. Anja suffered a postpartum depression after giving birth to their first son Richieu and she was taken to a sanatorium in Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia. When they returned back to Poland the political tensions had become worse and the Second World War was looming large and Vladek was drafted in the army. Vladek got captured and was forced to work as a prisoner of war. After his release, he found that Germany has annexed Sosnowiec and he was released to the other side of the border in the German protectorate. But Vladek managed to cross the border and was reunited with this family. In 1943, the Nazis moved the Jews of the Sosnowiec Ghetto to Srodula. The family got separated and Richieu was sent to Zawiercie to stay with an aunt for safety. But when more and more Jews were taken from the ghettos to Auschwitz, the aunt poisoned herself, her children and Richieu to escape the Gestapo. In Srodula, many Jews including Vladek and Anja build bunkers to hide themselves from the Germans. Eventually they made their way back to Sosnowiec and there also they had to move from one hiding place to the next. They made a deal with the smugglers to escape to Hungary but it was a trap. They were arrested by the Gestapo and were taken to Auschwitz, where they remained separated until after the war.

The rest of the story is taken forward in *Maus II* and the year is 1986. Vladek told of his hardships in the camps, of starvation and abuse, of his resourcefulness, of avoiding the *selektionen*- the process by which prisoners were selected for further labour or execution. Anja and Vladek exchanged occasional messages despite the danger. Their hardships only increase and Vladek caught typhus. The war ended in 1945 and Vladek reunited with Anja. The book ends with Vladek turning over in his bed as he finishes his story. The final image in *Maus* is of Vladek and Anja's tombstone. Vladek died in 1982 before the book was completed. The impending challenge of writing about Holocaust is that its horror outfaces the artistic imagination. But Spiegelman disproves this theory in his representation of Jews as mice, Germans as cat, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, French as frogs and so on. In 1992, *Maus* became the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize. Art Spiegelman is currently a contributing editor and artist for the *New Yorker*. Other honours he has received for *Maus* includes a Guggenheim fellowship and nominations for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2004 he published another graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* which was his reaction to the September 11 attacks in New York.

Maus as a Holocaust Narrative

James Young opined, "*Maus* is not about the Holocaust so much as it is about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery of it" (670). As Vladek narrates his experiences to Art, Art shares with the readers his experiences of the storytelling sessions. *Maus* tells the story about the past as well as its unfolding as a narrative which is a reminder to the readers that Vladek's account does not simply portrays the past but constructs it. Hilary Chute argues that "*Maus* engages with the ethical dilemma of how to portray the past through the formal complexities of the comic book page, approaching history through its spatiality" ("*The Shadow*," 202). Scott McCloud argued that, "cartooned images work on abstraction and iconicity rather than realism; they strip down to an essential meaning and then amplify that meaning" (30). This calls for the accentuation of particular features.

The most significant feature of Spiegelman's portrayal of the Holocaust is the use of animal imagery or anthropomorphism. He represented himself as a mouse. Spiegelman justified his use of animal imagery as a method to retain authenticity. By using

animal imagery, Spiegelman defamiliarizes the Holocaust story. The use of Icons call for the participation of the readers to make them meaningful. When met with the question “Why Mice?” Spiegelman answered that he wanted “to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them” (*Metamaus* 110) in order to maintain focus on the relationship between characters and memory. Due to his simple drawings of the animals and their strong human characterizations, one begins to identify the characters as humans rather than animals. “Spiegelman’s occasional foregrounding of these ‘masks’ by showing the string which attaches them to the heads of the figures ejects the reader from the complacency of the animal metaphor and points to both its artifice and its effectiveness as a normalized aesthetic device” (McGlothlin 183). By viewing Jews being represented as mice the readers are confronted with the popular notion of the Holocaust which regarded them as inhuman (See fig. A, B and C). 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” (*Metamaus* 32). 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 points to the dehumanization of the Jews that led to the genocide and also to the animalistic and inhuman behaviour of the Nazis. “The more you think about it,” says Douglas Wolk, author of *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, “the deeper it becomes, real cats don’t just eat mice the way they do in cartoons; they torture them first” (343). Hitler’s statement that, “the Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” which we find at the beginning of the first volume is well realized within *Maus*. The creativity of the animal imagery and metaphor does not trivialize the Holocaust but rather points to the deeper meanings and reverberations of the Holocaust. Once Spiegelman received a complaint from a Polish curator who opposed the portrayal of Poles as pigs recalling how the Germans called them *schwein*. To this Spiegelman responded, “Yeah, and the Germans called us vermin. These aren’t my metaphors. These are Hitler’s” (Rosen 251).

In *Maus*, Spiegelman has refused to sentimentalize or sanctify the survivor, his father. Vladek lost his six year old son Richieu and most of his extended family during the war. He had to endure months of torture and starvation at Auschwitz, Birkenau and Dachau. As Spiegelman opined, “unimaginable suffering doesn’t make you better, it just makes you suffer” (*Metamaus* 11). *Maus* presents Vladek’s life in Europe before and after the war and also his later life in the United States in which he has become a stubborn, manipulative old man. He constantly bullied his second wife, Mala, another Holocaust survivor and made Spiegelman’s life also difficult in many ways (See fig. D and E). Vladek is unable to respond to his own story or learn from his story. With the combined use of image and text *Maus* is able to convey a variety of intersecting meanings and perceptions of the Holocaust. “More than creating a biographical account *Maus* depicts the process of transmitting and recording memory. Spiegelman strives to illustrate, figuratively and literally, the ways in which the present is continuously shaped and constituted with the past” (Crowley and Rijswijk 100). The notion and images of past and present is not separate in *Maus* but is rather interwoven in many different levels. As Vladek recounts the procedure of *selektionen* he physically demonstrates it by turning to ‘face left’ just as he was ordered to do by the Nazis (See fig. F). At the beginning of *Maus II* past and present are spatially combined. A territorial map of New York is juxtaposed upon a pictorial layout of the Auschwitz camp and Vladek is depicted in his concentration camp stripes in the foreground (See fig. G). This represents the extent to which Vladek’s present is formulated by his past. The prison stripes, in particular, are indicative of how Vladek is still trapped in the traumatic memory of the Holocaust. The past looming large over the present is subtly indicated by the visual foregrounding of symbols in the past. In one panel, Vladek is placed in front of Art when he is riding the stationary bicycle and Vladek’s Auschwitz tattoo is clearly visible (See fig. H). In the final panel of *Maus II*, Vladek tells Spiegelman, “I’m tired from talking Richieu and its enough stories for now” (296). Vladek mistaking Art as Richieu indicates how much he is entrapped in the past (See fig. I). This much noted temporal blurring in *Maus* portrays the incommensurability of the past and the present and more importantly the ‘belatedness’ of trauma. According to Van der Kolk’s and Van der Hart’s concept of traumatic memories, “the traumatized persons often can tell the story of their traumatization with a mixture of past and present, but their current life is characterized by doubt and past meaning schemes determine the interpretation of the present”(176).

The collapse of temporal space in *Maus* demonstrates and reinforces a dual perception. The first is that memory and history are not divorced entities rather they inform and consolidate each other. The second is that the memory and history has no definable beginning, middle or end. One’s story is continuous and fluid. This conveyance of memory and history is heightened through the combined used of image and text. “Epitomizing the possibilities of the new comics form , *Maus*, interlaced with different temporalities whose ontological weave it frames and questions through spatial aesthetics, rebuilds history through a potent combination of words and images that draws attention to the tenuous and fragile footing of the present”(Chute, “The Shadow,” 220). The title *My Father Bleeds History* is literally true as the wound of Holocaust remains so fresh in Vladek. By suggesting the victim’s lack of moral authority, Spiegelman forces the reader to confront “our own need for redemptory closure” (Young 696).



Fig A. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig B. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig C. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig D . Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig E . Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig F. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.

Maus belongs to the second generation Holocaust literature. Children of Holocaust survivors have felt both the presence and absence of Holocaust in their lives. Spiegelman remarked in *Metamaus*, “My parents did not talk in any coherent or comprehensive way about what they had lived through. It was always a given they have lived through “the War” which was their term for the Holocaust” (12). *Maus* is thus a depiction of how the trauma experienced by the father, Vladek Spiegelman is passed on to his son, Art Spiegelman. Art’s story is a confirmation to the fact that the generation that has never experienced the traumatic event can inherit the trauma from their ancestors, from their family. Spiegelman while rummaging through his mother’s private shelves found a copy of *Minister of Death : The Adolf Eichmann Story* and it had a few pages of pictures which was his first exposure to the atrocity photos.

Through *Maus* Spiegelman is attempting to fit himself into his family legacy. The second generation is possessed with what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory”. 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” (8). Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated. It is a full and as empty as memory itself. Post-memory reflects the level of identification with the original recipients of trauma. It is a kind of second generation’s response to the trauma inherited from their parents. Art’s inheritance of his parents’ trauma leads to his obsession with the Holocaust. Vladek’s and Anja’s past forms an important part of his identity. His identification with his parents’ affliction becomes so intense that he starts imagining being in Auschwitz. He recalls his perverse dreams from childhood about Nazi soldiers storming into his classroom and dragging away all the Jewish pupils, and he fantasizes about Zyklon B coming out from the shower of their bathroom instead of water (See fig. J).

Prisoner on the Hell Planet, a comix which Spiegelman wrote prior to *Maus* is his earliest testament to post-memory. It is also included in *Maus*. It is a portrayal of Spiegelman’s trauma which he experienced after his mother’s suicide. By including it in *Maus* he connects the tragedy with the Holocaust. In the comix he re-enacts his last encounter with his mother before her suicide. She asked him, “Artie you still love me don’t you?” (*Maus I* 103). To this he gave a cold reply, “I turned away, resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord: ‘Sure, ma!’”(103). This insensitive reaction haunted him and made him feel guilty of his mother’s death.



Fig G. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.



Fig H. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig I . Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.

The connection between Art's personal trauma and the Holocaust is even more obvious in a frame which shows the grieving Art as a prisoner as if he himself were in a death camp. The picture is dominated by the naked body of his mother in the coffin and contains a swastika sign on a camp wall and a pile of murdered victims at its bottom. Moreover, the mother's protruding hand grasping a razor at the left bottom edge of the frame has a tattooed prisoner's number. Art's outcries "Hitler did it!", "Mommy!" and "bitch" (103) manifest his attempt to transfer his guilt on the other persons and thus to relieve his traumatized consciousness. *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* differs from the other part of *Maus* both stylistically and graphically not only by the depiction of characters as humans and by the black colour of its pages but especially by its fragmentary character. Expressionistic style and the emotional charge of *Prisoner* is in stark contrast to the detached, understated style of narrative in *Maus*. The fragmentary character is derived from the nature of traumatic topic. It is derived not only from the high emotionality but also from the inaccessibility of the original trauma that cannot be fully integrated into Spiegelman's consciousness. As Cathy Caruth opined, "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (*Unclaimed* 92). Although Art did not witness the violent scene directly he is overwhelmed by the unexpected death of his mother (See fig. K, L and M).

The beginning of the second chapter of *Maus II* called 'Auschwitz: Time Flies' deviates from the usual merging of the past and present. It presents a metanarrative which takes place in 1987, one year after the publication of *Maus I* and five years after Vladek's death. This section is very important as it raises the moral question of who has the right to represent the Holocaust. This section reveals Art's anxieties about the book's publication. Art is sitting over a drawing table smoking, now portrayed as a human in a mouse's mask, with flies buzzing around his head. Vladek died of a heart attack in 1982, he writes, and he and his wife, Françoise, are expecting their first child in a few months. As the focus shifts from panel to panel Art becomes more visible and in the final panel, we have a full view of Art sitting over his desk and the origin of the flies becomes clear (See fig. N). Art's table is resting on a mound of naked mouse corpses and a watchtower ringed with barbed wire is visible to the right.

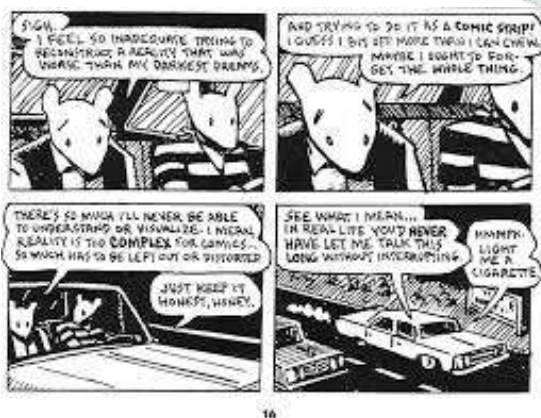


Fig J. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.

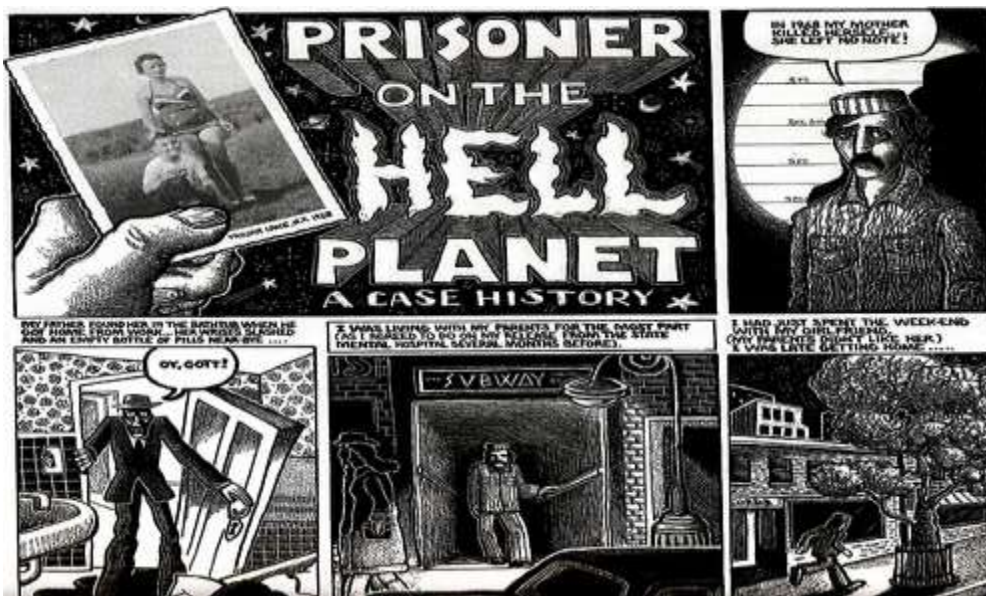


Fig K. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig L. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.

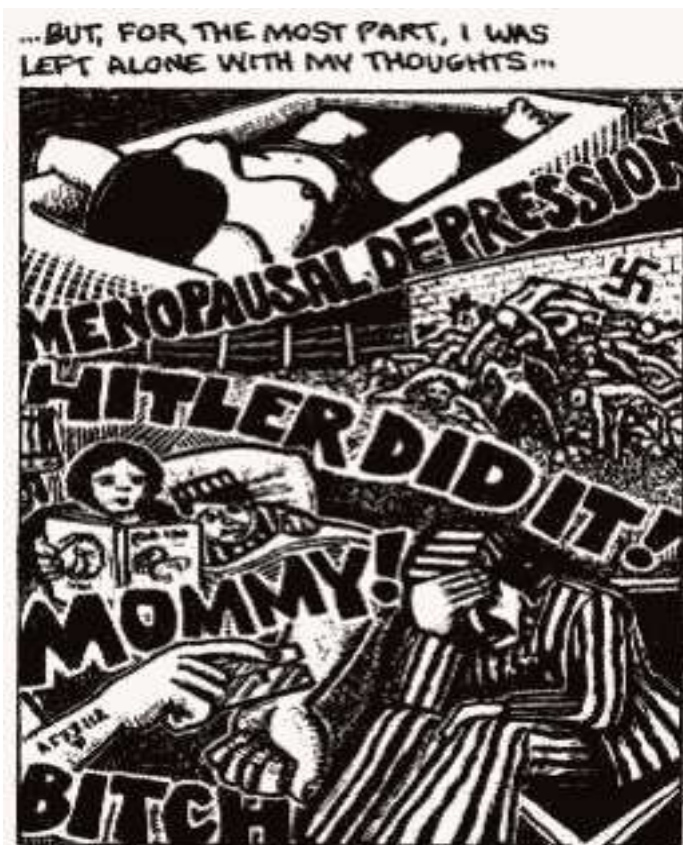


Fig M. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I*. 1986. New York: Pantheon.



Fig N. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.

The commercial success of *Maus I* only made Art depressed. In the second scene of the second chapter of *Maus II* Art is seen to have his regular appointment with the psychoanalyst Pavel. When Pavel asked, “So, How are you feeling?” (203) Art replied,

“Completely messed up. I mean things couldn’t be going better with my career or at home, but mostly I feel like crying” (203). He belittled his own accomplishments in comparison to his father’s achievement of surviving Auschwitz. Art told Pavel, “No matter what I accomplish, it doesn’t seem like much comparing to surviving Auschwitz” (204). Pavel suggests that even Vladek feels guilty because he has survived while the others have not (204). Studies have revealed many survivors feeling guilty for the same reason. Pavel’s point is that Vladek has transmitted his survivor’s guilt onto Art. Art refused a total identification with the victims of the Holocaust and his regular meetings with Pavel are indicative of that. Spiegelman is aware of the ethical problem of the depiction of the Holocaust by the post- Holocaust generation. To avoid this danger, he uses various strategies ranging from irony and humor to the variety of graphic means distancing him from the Holocaust, the most apparent of which is the use of animal imagery.

Spiegelman’s awareness of the nature of trauma manifests itself in the blurring of temporal boundaries, graphically expressed in various innovative ways, for instance by merging the present with the past within a frame or beyond it (when his drawings stretch beyond the gutters). The form of a graphic narrative enables Spiegelman “to travel in another realm” (McCloud 36), in this case in the time of World War II, and also to convey Art’s temporal and spatial relocation as the result of intergenerational transmission of trauma. However, through various formal means (in particular by using anthropomorphized animals) Spiegelman distances himself from his parents’ trauma, and thus he avoids the ethically unacceptable appropriation of the experience of the Holocaust. This distance is lost only in the embedded comic strip “Prisoner on the Hell Planet”, in which the cartoonist conveys his firsthand trauma, but even here he connects his personal trauma with the historical trauma of the Holocaust. Moreover, an important part of *Maus* are its metanarrative passages dealing with the challenges of the artistic representation of the Holocaust, which for Art are traumatizing factors in themselves.

Spiegelman was criticised by many for the use of comics to portray a serious event such as the Holocaust. The criticism arose from the common perception of the comics as a ‘lowbrow’ genre. Spiegelman by recording his father’s experience of the Holocaust gave expression to the collective history of the Jews and their traumatic past. Spiegelman defined his style as “commix”, the commixture of words and pictures to tell a story and 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” (Young 672).

The readers of *Maus* are engaged both mentally and physically to understand the relationship between the text and images. Spiegelman reduces the gap between text and images by using simple graphics. The images aid in the ‘realization’ of Vladek’s words while the text help to contextualize the illustration. For example, the graphic representation of the layouts of bunker and crematorium, hiding places, territorial maps (See fig. O, P and Q) gives the readers a more vivid understanding of the Holocaust. The chimney is a recurrent image in *Maus* that portrays the fate of the Jews in the hand of the Nazis (See fig. R). Another recurrent image is the swastika which entangles the life of the Jews. In one scene Vladek and Anja escape from Sosnowiec but does not know where to go. They are seen treading a path that has the shape of the swastika (See fig. S). *Maus* demands the reader to confront the suffering and obscenity of the Holocaust as visual representation. By employing simple graphics, Spiegelman encourages the readers to fill-out the images using their imaginations. There are some benefits of using cartoons as opposed to a realistic style. Simple pictures amplify the meaning behind them and we will be able to focus better on the complexity of the ideas. And more importantly, the simpler an image, the more one is able to relate to it. In other words, “we don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (McCloud 36).

The visual arrangement of comics allows the simultaneity of past and present to be captured in ways that linear narrative cannot. “The comic page’s formal capabilities thus enable the spatial representation of time to be multiple and relational, ideal for expressing the symptoms of disjunctive temporality and causality that characterize narratives of trauma”(Whitehead 6). In *Maus*, Spiegelman, “makes interlacing temporalities part of the text’s very structure” (Chute, “The Shadow,” 230). The paradox of trauma is that it cannot be represented and yet it must be. According to Anne Whitehead, “the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (3). The formal properties of comics are particularly useful in this regard. The commixture of words and images generates a triangulation of meaning. “A kind of three dimensional narrative is formed in the movement between words, images, and the reader’s eye. Such a form of narrative manifests an internal register of knowledge” (Young 672). In the case of *Maus*, it manifests an internal register of traumatic knowledge. In *Art Spiegelman’s Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust*, Thomas Doherty says of comics that, “By its very nature, it seems ill-equipped for the moral seriousness and tonal restraint that have been demanded by Holocaust art. But also by its very nature the cartoon medium possesses a graphic quality well suited to a confrontation with Nazism and the Holocaust” (71).

In *Maus* “Spiegelman transgresses the sacredness of Auschwitz by depicting his survivor father’s suffering” (Rothberg 665). By doing so he does not repeat what has already been seen while still existing within a textual representation of familiar history. By using the medium of comics to depict the Holocaust, Spiegelman elevates its commonly low position into a form that is “highly expressive, multi faced, critical and psychologically layered” (Young 675). Paul Buhle claims that, “More than a few readers have described *Maus* as the most compelling of any Holocaust depiction, perhaps because only the caricatured quality of comic art is equal to the seeming unreality of an experience beyond all reason” (16). The Holocaust is considered to be an ‘impossible reality’ and it is so effective when a fantastic medium as the comics depicts what is unimaginable. Michael Rothberg claims that, “by situating a non-fictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, ‘comic’ space, Spiegelman captures the hyper-intensity of Auschwitz” (671).

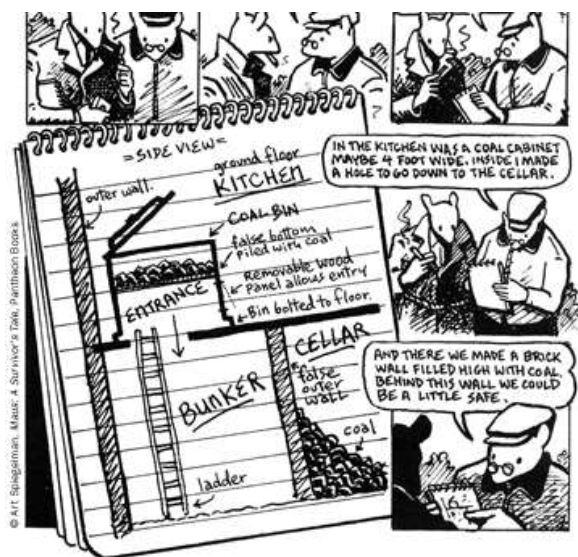


Fig O. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.

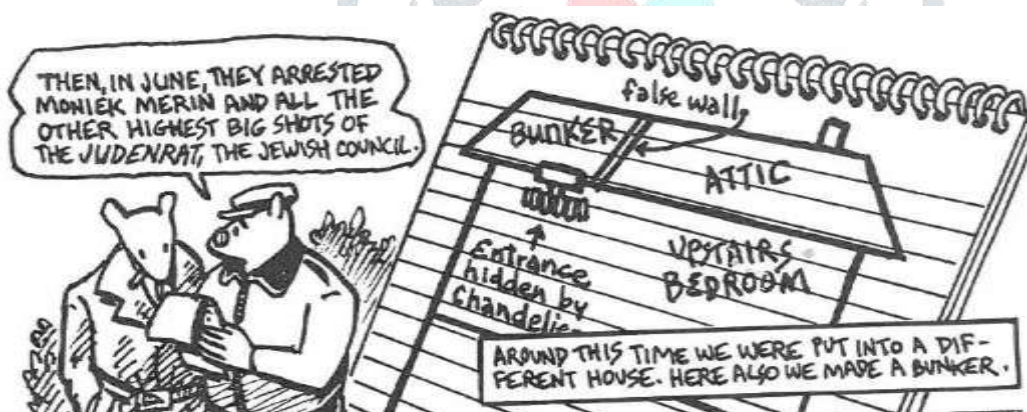


Fig P. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.

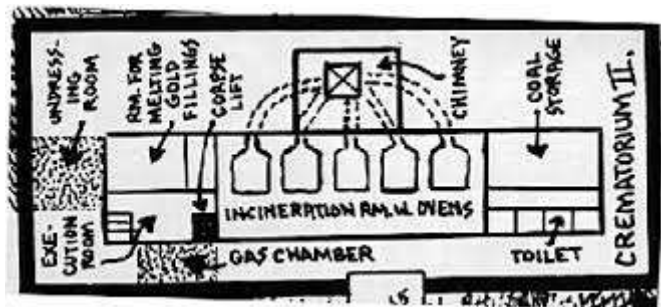


Fig Q. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon.



Fig R. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992. New York: Pantheon



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Fig S. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II*. 1992 New York: Pantheon.

CONCLUSION

Spiegelman's notion of hybridity does not consist in the relation between images and text but in "the diachronic view of comics, following the combination of literature with pictorial narrative and printmaking in their historical development" (Rothberg

675). Considering values of great works of literature and comics and all conditions for categorization of comics as literature, he does not give a univocal answer to whether comics falls into the category of literature, yet he admits their rising social status and respect among literary critics and the emergence of what can be labelled as the comics canon. This canon definitely includes Spiegelman's *Maus* which not only became the classic work of comics but also found its way into the general consciousness.

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