

## **STEPHANIE CERASO**

### **Survivors' Tales: Cultural Trauma, Postmemory, and the Role of the Reader in Art Spiegelman's Visual Narratives**

Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence.<sup>1</sup>

Many traditional modes of historiography represent the past as though it were completely severed from the present. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "there are innumerable tasks of historical scholarship that have no relation to our own present and to the depths of its historical consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Historical narratives often create a false sense of closure by appearing to be unified, coherent stories based solely on factual evidence. These narratives isolate us from the past by masking history's contemporary relevance. But, Gadamer continues, "there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future. History is only present to us in light of our futurity."<sup>3</sup> In terms of continuity, or creating a continuous historical narrative, traditional historical accounts are problematic. Although the transmission of history is dependent on the reader's ability to make connections with the past, the reader is alienated from these seemingly objective historical narratives. Furthermore, because these accounts ignore the relationship

between the past and the present, thereby making history appear irrelevant, they produce a de-historicised notion of the future.

(Marianne Hirsch's term for the notion of being haunted by memories of trauma that one has experienced only indirectly<sup>6</sup>) on Spiegelman and his work, as well as the ethical questions that arise in *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers*. More specifically, I will argue that the proliferation of trauma in the reader, ethical or not, plays a crucial role in the transmission of cultural trauma/history. Because this transmission cannot occur without the reader's active participation in the text, it is also necessary to look at how the reader's individual experiences affect the ways in which history is passed on and distorted from generation to generation. Examining Spiegelman's engaging mode of historical representation will illustrate that the past's role in shaping the present, particularly how we have come to know about the past, must be exposed and understood in order for transformation to occur in the future.

## I Silence Speaks

Samuel Beckett once said: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness".... On the other hand, he SAID it.<sup>7</sup>

In *At Memory's Edge*, James Young comments on Spiegelman's attempt to capture those Holocaust stories that remain untold. Young writes,

Spiegelman seems also to be asking how we write the stories of the dead without filling in their absence. In a limited way, the commixture of image and narrative allows the artist to do just what is possible crucial parts of memory usually lost to narrative alone, such as the silences and spaces between words.<sup>8</sup>

Young continues this discussion of representing the unrepresentable in an interview with Spiegelman. When asked about his substitution of animals for humans, Spiegelman replies, "I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them. I want to show the masking of these events *in* their representation."<sup>9</sup> The anthropomorphised characters symbolise

that which cannot be revealed: distorted or lost memories, the experiences of the deceased, and the horrific reality of the Holocaust itself, which is impossible to recapture. Moreover, the animals draw attention to themselves, constantly reminding readers not to conflate the actual Holocaust with the constructed memory of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

The unshowable and ineffable elements that Young examines take on a visible form in *Maus*. The gutters (the spaces between panels) tacitly enrich Spiegelman's story in a way that words or images alone could not; gutters are unique to the comic medium. The silences and voids surrounding personal and historic events are located within these gutters. They are spaces from which we can extract just as much, if not more, meaning as we can from images or words. Clearly, the transmission of meaning does not simply stop when language stops. As Michel Foucault writes,

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name... —is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.<sup>11</sup>

Like Foucault, Spiegelman does not subscribe to a binary division that separates the spoken from the unspoken/unspeakable. Rather, he has found a visible way not to say things. Spiegelman uses the inclusion and embodiment of silence, the silence surrounding both the Holocaust and his own life story, as a device to incorporate the reader into his text.

Throughout *Maus*, we are constantly made aware of what is lacking in Spiegelman's narrative. For instance, in a conversation with his therapist, Art says, "the victims who died can



happened to his father, Vladek is disgusted that his son would even refer to these kids as “friends.” He bursts out, “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... *then* you could see what it is, friends!...”<sup>16</sup> The spatial arrangement of the very last panel in the sequence, the one that leads us into the “real” story, is especially significant. The panel is double the size of the others on the page and it provides the reader with a zoomed-out view. We see Art and Vladek standing in their empty front yard, surrounded by empty space. The remarkably large font and capacious text bubble containing Vladek’s words, which are also unique to this panel, call our attention to what is missing. The white space around the words, the starkness of the picture, and the physical space between Art and Vladek all make us more aware of what is not there, of what is not being said. And, while the ellipsis after “friends!” alerts us that words have been omitted or cut off, it also reveals that there are answers and stories within the pregnant silence of the panel. Thus, the silence and space surrounding Vladek’s words incite the reader to turn the page in hopes of filling in the gaps. What is not being said is driving the narrative forward.

In addition, the silences between the panels also help draw the reader into the story. However, it is important to recognise that the gutters themselves cannot activate the medium or produce meaning without the work of the reader. The gutters provide space for readers to make meaning of the story *and* to incorporate their own memories and experiences into the text. The meaning that pervades this space, the meaning which the reader must bring to the narrative, is precisely what brings the story into being. Furthermore, the silences within and surrounding the panels do not simply invite the reader into the text. Rather, Spiegelman demands the reader to jump into the silences and fill them up with meaning. The narrative will make no sense unless

the reader can navigate through the silences and follow the logic from panel to panel.

Disturbingly, in order to make sense of *Maus*, the reader must first understand and adopt Nazi logic. For example, Spiegelman never explicitly defines the animal symbolism for the reader (the Jews are represented as mice, the Nazis as cats).<sup>17</sup> The meaning of the symbolism is another one of the text's silences and it is up to the reader to give that silence meaning. The reader must accept that the Jews are represented as mice because they were viewed as prey, vermin, pests that must be exterminated. The reader's tacit agreement that this metaphor holds, that it works, is what implicates her into the narrative. Rather than feeling alienated from the horror, then, the reader is actually complicit with the rationale that led to the possibility of the "final solution." Spiegelman implicates us in the horror by positioning us within the minds of those who were responsible for it.

Since the majority of readers most probably think of themselves as compassionate human beings, the adoption of Nazi logic puts us in a seriously distressing position. But why would Spiegelman intentionally invoke a moral dilemma in his readers? One reason, I think, is that by positioning the reader within the text, Spiegelman is attempting to de-familiarise the Holocaust narratives that we have become so accustomed to: unified narratives that present trauma in a factual, detached way. In these narratives, the reader is expected simply to accept the facts as something that happened in the past, something that is over and done with. Spiegelman's narratives, on the other hand, jar the reader out of this passive role by making her participate in the trauma. In this way, Spiegelman's mode of storytelling simultaneously de-familiarises traditional historical

Although Spiegelman's method of historical representation is unusual, particularly due to his choice of medium, it is not unprecedented. Techniques like de-familiarisation and the narrative intertwining of past and present are common tropes in historical fiction, biography, autobiography, and literary non-fiction. What sets Spiegelman apart, however, is that his texts show us how we have come to know what happened in the past. His genre-busting narratives uncover the *process* of how we interpret and understand history. In this sense, his project is very much a hermeneutical one. The "meta" or self





Curiously, Spiegelman's work both criticises and participates in our society's compulsion to remember. For example, in a panel which illustrates Art and his wife, Françoise, watching the towers burn from a distance, Françoise shrieks, "Wow! I oughta run home and get our camera." Art replies, "Nah! There'll be lotsa photographers!"<sup>19</sup> Françoise's gut reaction (a reaction that has become common among witnesses of recent catastrophic events) is not to run away from the horror, but to document it



### III The Contagious Excess of Trauma

“Those crumbling towers burned their way into every brain...”<sup>25</sup>

Spiegelman’s attempts to work through or release his traumatic memories and/or postmemories are ultimately futile. In an interview he states, “for the parts of my story—of my father’s story—that are just on tape or on transcripts, I have an overall idea and eventually I can fish it out of my head. But the parts that are in the book are now in neat little boxes. I know what happened by having assimilated it that fully. And that’s part of my reason for this project, in fact.”<sup>26</sup>

Spiegelman tries to contain the memories of trauma within the panels of his narrative (as I have pointed out above). By locking them in with borders, they will ostensibly be unable to haunt him. In this respect, the medium Spiegelman has chosen to represent trauma is quite appropriate. As Scott McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*

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which have been overused in scholarly works and the media. But in recreating these images, Spiegelman is able to translate the jarring effect of the original trauma to his readers. He breathes life and feeling back into these pictures by re-contextualising them. However, Spiegelman's purpose for re-contextualising may have more to do with personal reasons than with shocking his readers. Hirsch suggests,

In repeatedly exposing themselves to the same pictures, postmemorial viewers can produce in themselves the effects of traumatic repetition that plague the victims of trauma. Even as the images repeat the trauma of looking, they disable, in themselves, any restorative attempts. *It is only when they are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts, that they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through.* (emphasis added)<sup>39</sup>

Although “a postmemorial working through” may be Spiegelman's ultimate aim in re-contextualising these images, the repetition in his work certainly does not indicate that he will come to an eventual understanding or acceptance of the past. For instance, after the publication of *Maus*, Spiegelman had two different museum exhibitions in New York City, both entitled “The Road to *Maus*.”<sup>40</sup> These exhibitions featured earlier drafts of his panels and included recordings of the original interviews with Vladek. As Young notes, “Spiegelman hoped to bring his true object of representation into view: the process by which he arrived at a narrative, by which he made meaning in and *worked through* a history that has been both public and personal” (emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> Young also seems to be of the opinion that Spiegelman has “worked through” his trauma by re-contextualising these images and stories once again. However, the fact that Spiegelman needs to keep finding new ways to recreate his traumatic memories reveals that his “working through” is nowhere near complete. For instance, a fully interactive CD-ROM version of *Maus* was produced in 1994, two years after Spiegelman's initial museum exhibitions. And, as I have illustrated, the Holocaust images that haunt him (even after he has recreated them) have

been incorporated into yet another traumatic representation in *In The Shadow of No Towers*. In addition, Spiegelman's most recent work-in-progress—"Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?\*"—deals directly with his postmemorial suffering. Spiegelman has been publishing instalments of this project in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Much of his material is related to the creation of *Maus* and the transmission of trauma. In one of the more memorable panel sequences, Spiegelman shows a father passing on a "family heirloom" to his son.<sup>43</sup> When the son opens the locked chest, a monster flies out and starts to grow larger and larger. The father replies, "It makes you feel so worthless you don't believe you even have the right to breathe!... And—just think—someday you'll be able to pass it on to YOUR son!"<sup>44</sup> Spiegelman's newest work implies that the "monster" (or shadow or disease) will continue to grow, and because he cannot escape from it, he must continue to exercise his demons. As these examples demonstrate, there seems to be no end in sight to Spiegelman's "working through." But what his numerous revisions have done is make an increased number of repetitive, invasive memories publicly available for his readers and viewers to experience. Thus, the excessive repetition and re-contextualisation in Spiegelman's work has created even more opportunities to elicit the effect of trauma in those who are exposed to it. Just as he was bombarded with stories and images of the Holocaust as a child until he too was traumatised, he is now bombarding his readers and viewers with the same contagious horror.

#### **IV Cognitive Colonization**

The direct connection between experience and remembrance is now not severed, rather, it is redrawn to capture the complexity of effects of that experience beyond individual memories.<sup>45</sup>

The oversized pages of *In The Shadow of No Towers*, which allude to the monumental nature of 9/11, are cluttered with detailed, multi-coloured images. Hence, the white spaces between the



panels and in the margins are particularly striking. The silences within these gutters demand readers to fill the space with meaning and weave their own experiences into the narrative, making them spectators as well as contributors to the events being represented. As Louise Rosenblatt states,

the reader's attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience—external reference, internal response.... Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolized as he senses them. The symbols point to these sensations, images, objects, ideas, relationships, with the particular associations or feeling-tones created by his past experiences with them in actual life or in literature.... Thus built into the raw material of the literary process itself is the particular world of the reader.<sup>46</sup>

The responses the text evokes in the reader, which will be informed by the reader's unique storehouse of memories and experiences, will affect the way cultural memory gets transmitted to subsequent generations. The reader's connection with and proximity to the event will inevitably shape and distort what is remembered and eventually transmitted. In the introductory note to *In The Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman writes,

Only when I traveled to a university in the Midwest in early October 2001 did I realize that all New Yorkers were out of their minds compared to those for whom the attack was an abstraction. The assault on the Pentagon confirmed that the carnage in New York City was indeed an attack on America, not one more skirmish on foreign soil. Still, the small town I visited in Indiana—draped in flags that reminded me of the garlic one might put on a door to ward off vampires—was at least as worked up over a frat house's zoning violations as with threats from 'raghead terrorists.'<sup>47</sup>

Because of readers' wide range of exposure to the event itself, the cultural trauma presented in Spiegelman's text will affect them in extremely diverse ways. For instance, I feel more connected to Spiegelman's image of the frazzled family helplessly watching 9/11 fo t a3rom2(n)-2(g)]TJ -0.00-

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the trauma. A reader who takes a passive or naive approach to Spiegelman's texts will not be nearly as affected as a reader who actively makes meaning of the silences and omissions. And, whether or not we can make meaning and connect with history will determine how history is

The colonization of past trauma into the present is also visualised in *In The Shadow of No Towers*. Spiegelman includes a supplement of early twentieth-century comics, such as *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Kinder Kids*. He specifically chooses comics dealing with issues related to 9/11: patriotism, war, fear, terror. These comics were pulled from the archives to remind us that terror and trauma have always been a part of the past, that this is nothing new. Horrific experiences and memories are embedded in the fabric of our history and will continue to resurface. The comic characters from another time have an invasive presence throughout the text. For example, they literally fall from the gutters at the top of page eight. Below them Spiegelman writes: “The blast that c-1(t)twvasThese comics of320(ow,)-4( s)-5a10(ar)(r)3( (sck9 Td [(w)2(r)3(i)-2(t)(s)1 (







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<sup>17</sup> Here I am referring to *Maus I*. In *Maus II* Spiegelman does make references to his anthropomorphising, particularly in the “Time Flies” chapter (39-74). However, even in the second volume, explicit definitions are absent and Spiegelman’s decision to assign specific animals to different ethnic groups is never elaborated on.

<sup>18</sup> Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Hirsch, 9.



