

Postmodern, or else?

The case of Maus by Art Spiegelman

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The present essay is based on *Maus. A Survivor's Tale*, a graphic memoir on the Holocaust, written in two volumes, entitled respectively *My Father Bleeds History* and *And Here My Troubles Began*, by Art Spiegelman.

In 1986 the American artist confessed to having initially ruled out a postmodern structure for his project (1994: n.p.), a resolve undoubtedly due to the ongoing widespread criticism of postmodernism as being “antithetical to history” (Eaglestone, 2008: 241).

Postmodernism has, in fact, long been charged with being ill-equipped to deal with the Holocaust, a chain of events Spiegelman himself has repeatedly referred to as the “central trauma of the Twentieth century” (qtd. in LaCapra, 1998: 40).

The main reason for the author's original concern is postmodernism's epistemological relativism, a position that, as some historians have claimed, e.g. Richard Evans and Deborah Lipstadt, has paved the way for a hideous strand of Holocaust denial, which peaked in the United States in the late 1970s, right about the time Spiegelman started working on his *Maus* project.

Nevertheless, *Maus* turned out to be one of the most controversial – and convincing – examples of postmodernist rethinking of historical writing. The working hypothesis discussed in the present essay is precisely the ‘inevitability’ of the text's postmodernist configuration, due to two main factors: firstly, the author's second-generation perspective, which prevents the mimetic representation of a reality – his parents' imprisonment in the Auschwitz Lager during World War II – beyond his cognition.

Accordingly, Spiegelman exposes the ardousness of gaining access to truth, reality, and the past by portraying the various nationalities involved in the conflict, including his parents, with an animal mask, modeled on the American mainstream ‘funny-animal’ comic heroes: the Jews are represented as mice and the Germans as cats, the Polish in piggy masks and the Americans as canines.

By entrusting the family tragedy to a language generally considered suitable only for entertainment, Spiegelman violates a taboo of Holocaust representation. In particular, the role of the protagonist in *Maus* performed by those mice, which are the inevitable evokers of the popular Disney world, marks an unprecedented eruption of pop culture inside the conversational world of extermination.

This results in a hybrid form, originated in a conflation of highbrow and lowbrow art, which Andreas Huyssen, in his seminal work *After the Great Divide*, deems typical of the transition from modernity to post-modernity. Huyssen points in particular at the disintegration of the traditional concept of 'Culture', substituted in post-modernity with a new pop culture of 'consumption' pruned of every hierarchy of value and language (1986: 142). The outcome of such phenomenon has been, in the literary field, the production of motley and fragmentary works, daring collages of languages once considered incompatible, of which *Maus* constitutes one of the most shining examples.

As regards historical disciplines, that positivist vision of history as science, capable of recreating the past, representing it in a mimetic and objective way has by now petered out (Iggers, 1996: 31-36). The postmodern has opposed this empiricist vision with a reflection of an epistemological and methodological character, resulting in a narratological approach, or rather, in a conception of historiography as a proper genre that uses stylistic and rhetorical instruments once considered exclusive to *Poiesis* (White, 1973: ix).

As Robert Eaglestone puts it, this approach offers, contrary to its critics, "very strong weapons in the fight against Holocaust denial" (2008: 227). In his opinion, this epistemological stance helps expose the techniques employed by deniers, which turn out to be no more than sheer antisemitic genre conventions disguised as history: "Denial is not history that is inaccurate: it is no sort of history at all, and simply cannot be discussed as if it were" (2008: 243).

Secondly, the peculiar narrative matter at the heart of the project – an oral history document of Spiegelman's father testimony of persecution and survival – determines a highly self-referential structure in which the process of history-making is exposed, and the traditional monolithic concept of History is replaced by two Lyotardian *petit récits*, which propose two multiple and even contradictory histories.

This daring figural solution obtained an enthusiastic critical countercheck, confirmed first of all by winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Different authoritative voices have, in fact, ascribed to *Maus* a text-matrix role in its treatment of the Holocaust, capable of inaugurating new, effective horizons of expression. Carol Widmer does not hesitate to define the work as "a milestone in the landscape of contemporary Holocaust representation" (1999: 13) expanding what Terrence Des Pres once referred to as "Holocaust Etiquette" (1988: 219) and pointing the way for other representations of a similar kind. Thomas Doherty is of the same opinion:

In the hands of cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a concept obscene on its face – a Holocaust comic book – became solemn and moving, absorbing and enlightening. (...) *Maus* redrew the contractual terms for depictions of the Holocaust in popular art. (1996: 70)

Those few dissenting voices have lingered over the presumed figural and expressive inadequacy of the medium, traditionally conceived in terms of a consumer good rather than a proper narrative genre, insofar as bound to commercial norms of mass communication. An objection often posed against such typology of products is its reducing of characters and situations to clichés endowed with easily predictable personalities and behaviors. Furthermore, the comic strip presents a peculiar propensity toward hyper-simplifying reality, reducing representations solely to traits essential for understanding the represented object. Such characteristic has always been perceived as a

structural shortcoming, limiting its expressive potentialities to frivolous themes, light and fun and, in any case, exclusively fictional, on the surface incompatible with the rigorous documentary vocation traditionally associated with literature inspired by the Holocaust.

Hillel Halkin, in his review of *Maus II* speaks out in particular against the use of funny-animal comics. “The Holocaust was a crime committed by humans against humans, not – as Nazi theory held – by one biological species against another [...]. To draw people as animals is doubly dehumanizing, once by virtue of the symbolism and once by virtue of graphic limitations.” (1992: 55) A position held moreover by the graphic artist Harvey Pekar, who would have wished a more traditional treatment of the Holocaust, executed through human characters and figures (Bolhafner, 1991: 96).

In spite of the mass of prejudices against comic strips, the technical mastery of Art Spiegelman, together with his profound knowledge of the medium, has allowed him to fully realize its expressive possibilities. Through *Maus*, the artist has, in fact, shown how the sequential art of comics possesses adequate qualities to deal effectively with themes of every degree of complexity, even that of the Holocaust. Besides, his achievement has opened new representational possibilities for the treatment of autobiographical accounts of other world and individual conflicts and traumata, thus paving the way for such successful memoirs as *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, *Last Day in Vietnam. A Memoir*, by Will Eisner and the more recent *Persepolis* by Marianne Satrapi.

The animal metaphor

As previously mentioned, for the realization of his animal characters, Spiegelman has copiously drawn on a very popular product in the American comic tradition, the funny-animal comics, which turn out to be inhabited by a host of animal figures *sui generis*, whose natural characteristics fulfill the sole function of defining the relational dynamics inside the story, while the animal fades away, dissolving, substituted with behavior and situations characteristic of human beings (Witek, 1989: 106). *Maus* constitutes a re-elaboration in underground style, in which the traditionally funny events are replaced with the tragic story of a Holocaust survivor.

Inside the text, the animal metaphor is indeed meant to dissolve as soon as the reader enters the narrative mechanisms, discovering the ways in which the species represented in both volumes are nothing but animal masks used to represent with the utmost possible faithfulness, on the one hand, the perception of reality on the part of those persecuted by the Nazis, inevitably limited to the predator/victim dynamics, and on the other hand, the relations of power among ethnicities during the Third *Reich* (Porro, 2012: 1-48).

This figural device is explicitly rendered in some amongst the work’s crucial scenes. For instance, in the last scenes of *Maus I* where Spiegelman’s parents Vladeck and Anja seek shelter in despair in their hometown, Sosnowiek (2003: 138). Being a zone off-limits for Jews, the couple seek to disguise their Jewish origin by wearing clothes without the Star of David, and in Vladeck’s case, an overcoat and military boots similar to those of the Gestapo functionaries.

Significantly, the husband and wife are given a pig mask overlapping the mice features, visibly fastened to their neck. Whereas Vladeck is easily able to pass himself as a

gentile, Anja's physical appearance betrays her Semitic origins, which are represented ironically with a huge mouse tail, impossible to conceal under her clothes. These are, moreover, drawn in the act of physically putting down the piggy mask when revealing their real identity to their Polish acquaintances to whom they run seeking help. Thus, it is impossible to not identify the people concealed behind the animal masks: women and men reduced to parasites, fleeing from an unprecedented attempt of mass pest control.

It is important to underline the way in which through his cartoon animal, especially thanks to the interpenetration between such far apart thematic poles, Spiegelman manages to faithfully outline the composition of the Third Reich society – filtered through the deforming lens of Nazi propaganda – fully restoring the oppressive, racist and anti-Semitic ideological charge.

The animal metaphor is, in fact, the outcome of an intentional kinship with the figural imagery of the Reich. Inside the text, such relation is preannounced in the epigraph of both volumes: the first, placed at the beginning of *Maus*, quotes excerpts of one of the Führer's speeches: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" while the following epigraph (164), taken from an article published in a German newspaper in the 1930s, expands the Nazi ideological horizons overseas, explicitly recalling the most famous mouse character in comics, Mickey Mouse, defined as "the most miserable ideal ever revealed [...] the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom".

As it is demonstrated in a detestable pamphlet entitled *Der Jude als Weltparasit*, the pillar of Nazi anti-Semitism was an all-accomplished alleged 'parasitism' of the Jewish population, once moral, economic and even physiological. The unceasing action of Propagandaministerium led by Joseph Göbbels was, in fact, able to spread that anti-semitism – already beating in the heart of German popular culture – to a conspicuous tranche of national public opinion, and in particular, to important sectors of the *intelligentsia*.

The animal constellation of *Maus* proves definitely human: communicative but not misleading, it removes the most emotionally intense implications from the narrative, particularly the traditionally inherent horror in Holocaust literature, while allowing the constitution of an empathetic bond with the protagonists and the many hardships they encounter. In approaching the theme, the text staves off the intolerable gnawing of rhetorics, instead favoring knowledge and critical reflection, the ineluctable conditions for the perpetuation of the memory of those events.

The narrative dimension: Maus as an oral testimony

Alessandro Portelli begins a keen reflection on the diversity of oral history, highlighting firstly the exquisitely narrative nature of the sources (2007: 9).

The impact of oral history on traditional historiography, Portelli continues, is comparable to the transformative style impressed upon literary writing by the contemporary novel. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the representation of an oral testimony demands peculiar narrative instruments that, as the present pages intend to demonstrate, in the specific case of *Maus* are ascribable to the figural channel of the postmodern.

In his essay, he proceeds to outline the role of oral sources in historical reconstruction (12). Even if not essential on the referential level, the oral sources, in fact, boast the prerogative of elucidating the most profound meaning of historical events. The spontaneous conformation of oral testimony, inclusive of the explicit and implicit traits of discourse, sheds light on unexplored areas of research, particularly from a micro-historical perspective. Therefore, what emerges will not be only new information about the events, but also their relative repercussions on the existence of single individuals.

As Portelli furthermore points out, oral sources are not objective: a fact, he explains, which is also valid for any research based on written documents, but intrinsic in the case of orality. It, in fact, deals with “fonti contemporanee alla ricerca più che all’evento, costruite, variabili, parziali,” (17) which “impongono allo storico un confronto con la soggettività del narratore.” (12)

A special relation between the testifier and the researcher ensues. Oral history is, in fact, set up as the collaborative creation of a testimony in narrative form, a project in which the source and the interviewer are both involved to a great degree (12). The latter thus turns out to be endowed with a maieutic role in the production of the oral testimony.

As Portelli puts it, in oral history, the researcher (26) rises to the position of an unadulterated co-protagonist of the testimonial and narrative act. From this point of view, the typical omniscient narrator of traditional historiography is substituted with a couple of first-person narrating voices: the historian and the testifier.

This multiplication of perspectives is a prelude to an apportionment of the narratorial function. According to Portelli, there is, hence, outlined:

Un punto di vista circoscritto dalla parzialità delle fonti e dalla parzialità del narratore [...]. Naturalmente, lo storico e le sue fonti non sono la stessa “parte”. Il confronto, come conflitto o come ricerca di unità fra queste due parzialità non è il meno significativo degli elementi che costituiscono la storia orale. (21)

Thus, the representation of an oral testimony cannot disregard the presence of a self-referential component, inclusive of the dialogic relation between the testifier and the narrator and its relative impact on the articulation of the diegesis.

Maus is a composite work, characterized by a significant diegetic partiality, marked by two *récits de vie* that are caught up in constant confrontation. The title of the volume *A Survivor’s Tale* may, on the one hand, point at a narrative of an exclusively biographical order related to Vladeck Spiegelman. However, the presence of the possessive adjective ‘my’ in both of the subheadings of the volumes is a strategic indication of the active involvement of the second narrator and protagonist: Artie – *Kuntsfigur* of the same Art Spiegelman, the depository of the survivor’s tale.

Both stories are channeled into two not completely distinct narrative dimensions: the representation of Vladeck’s concentration camp experience and the narrative framework set in the U.S. between 1978 and 1986. The latter is definitely richer: inside it, we witness the portrayal of the ‘testimony event’ of the survivor, including the human, social and time-space context in which it has taken shape. Furthermore, the presence of the autobiographical/testimonial *récit* of the author is revealed, as well as the conspicuous *mise-en-abyme* of the composition of the work itself.

If we consider the opening scenes of the first volume, the maiuetic role of Artie is exposed immediately: in such regard, see a page reproduced in the exergue of the work, where it is possible to witness the genesis of the oral testimony.

After a family dinner, Artie approaches the old father and proposes to him a collaboration on a project that he has long been entertaining in his mind. “I still want to draw that book about you... About your life in Poland, and the war.” (2003: 14) While soliciting the centrality of his father’s experience in the configuration of the work, Artie seems to wish to confer a different cut, a self-referential imprint on his life interview. To Vladeck’s resistance to open up about the past: “It would take many books, my life, and no one wants anyway to hear such stories,” (14) he applies more pressure not so much on “the war” but on the circumstances of the first encounter between the father and his future wife Anja. This request diverts the narrative focus away from the figure of the ex-deportee and instead reroutes it purposefully on the author’s own origin as a son: “I want to hear it. Start with mom. Tell me how you met.” (14)

Vladeck’s reaction, in turn, leads the narrative in a different direction. The old man, for his part, seems determined to promote his own story, recalling the splendor of a youth spent in Czesstokowa, when he was a rampant textile trader with an extraordinary resemblance to Rudolph Valentino. He begins his story by recalling an old love affair prior to his marriage to Anja.

From these first phrases, it is already possible to verify the way in which the ex-deportee’s oral testimony develops from the constant interaction between the two often opposing subjectivities, at times involved in a sort of competition, undoubtedly the outcome of the tormented personal relationship that binds the two protagonists together.

If we now consider the conclusive page of this chapter, set in the narrative framework, we may furthermore notice the way Vladeck suddenly breaks off the thread of the narrative to warn his son/writer against the eventual publication of such stories, which are according to him frivolous and certainly inappropriate for a text on the Holocaust: “I don’t want you should write this in your book! It has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!” (25) Artie’s response clarifies his authorial intentions on the project in a meta-narrative way: “But Pop – it’s great material. It makes everything more real – more human. I want to tell *your* story, the way it really happened.” (25)

Hence, in that case, the partiality of the source, no longer a limit but a value typical of a bottom-up research, favors the emersion of *Alltagsgeschichte* from the war period. The private records of the ex-deportee turn out to be priceless when delving into micro-areas that would otherwise be scarcely examined by historiography. The *excursus* of his rich sentimental past is, in fact, able to elucidate the traumatic gap between, on the one hand, life in the pre-war society, in the case of Vladeck and his peers, filled with the healthy ambitions of youth, and on the other hand, their existence under the monstrous Nazi aegis. Therefore, the story of the old man provides a further opportunity to evaluate the enormous social impact of the sudden historic-political transformations taking place in Europe in the 1930s. Moreover, as the comment of the authorial *persona* reveals, the presence of an anecdote of such kind contributes to intensify the realism of the above-mentioned event, fully restoring the humanity of the character, all the more intense if considered in the light of the subsequent traumatic historical developments in which he would later find himself.

The discussion on whether or not to include the love affair in the book depicts the way in which the definitive aspect of an oral testimony depends upon a series of variables often avulsed from historical events and bound instead to the respective ‘partiality’ of the interviewer and the testifier. It is helpful, in fact, to point out, in the following panel, an exchange that highlights Artie’s original verbal obedience to the paternal will.

Vladeck: “[...] I can tell you other stories, but such private things, I don’t want you should mention.”

Artie: “Okay, okay, I promise.” (25)

It is evident that Spiegelman could have included this episode without making the slightest hint at the circumstances of its transmission. Nevertheless, if on the one hand, the scene denotes a certain lack of filial loyalty, on the other hand, it demonstrates the historical loyalty of the author; a loyalty that is no longer directed at the oral testimony’s contents as they are impossible to reproduce with scientific accuracy, given the particular technical conformation of comics and the generational distance of its author from the events. The inclusion of such a discussion underlines, in meta-narrative modality, the work’s indirect structure: the Vladeck incident turns out to be doubly mediated, not only according to the demands of the particular expressive genre chosen, but above all, through the sensibility of the artist/narrator/historian who enforces his own visualization and illustration of the events. The historical loyalty of the author is, instead, directed at the circumstances of the transmission and reception of the oral testimony, which he meticulously conveys in the text through a self-referential dimension.

This reciprocal interdependence of the two narrative perspectives becomes evident in the self-referential dimension. Consider, for example, a scene from the second volume (25): during a stroll with Artie, Vladeck talks about his days at the concentration camp and, in particular, of the long marches in which prisoners were forced to partake. Asked by his son about, according to him, the well-documented presence of an orchestra at the gates of Auschwitz, Vladeck affirms not to have ever seen or heard anything of the kind. And yet, despite Vladeck’s blunt denial, Spiegelman decides to use the image of the musical band in a good two panels when illustrating his father’s story (214). Hence, the verbal deployment and the visual one develop in different directions, each following the interpretative path laid out by their respective narrator.

The scene raises another crucial point for oral history: the question of the credibility of the testifiers. Unlike traditional historiography, the reliability of oral sources is not measured according to factual validity as that which is historically false or unverified can nevertheless be psychologically true for those involved in the events. The peculiarity of such sources, therefore, resides in their separation from the events, when the unadulterated historical narration is overlapped by transformations of memories, as well as the testifier’s efforts to re-elaborate the past and give shape to his own existence. Vladeck’s position with regard to the orchestra not only does not negate the validity of the historical documents, but on the contrary, discloses further aspects of that particular moment in his life. It is legitimate to suppose that, after such a long time, he would have removed the details of that experience from his memory, thus remembering only the exhausting marches to which he was forced. It is also plausible that in those moments, Vladeck, worried to keep up pace with other marchers in order to avoid eventual reprisals

by the Nazi soldiers, did not pay attention to what was happening around him. This demonstrates the way in which in oral historical narratives, the border between external reality and the internal world of the testifier, between the individual sphere and the group may become – if compared to traditional historiography – elusive (Young, 1998: 366-367).

Modernity reconciled with its limits

Other than influencing *Maus* from the formal and structural points of view, the oral dimension confers an aura of skepticism and relativity upon the work, maintaining the narrative constantly hovered between present and past, history and imagination, reality and fiction. In *Maus*, objectivity is not demanded: while underlining the value of his father's testimony, the author contextually highlights its inevitable gaps and incongruities, welcoming both the certainties and the psychological alterations of memory.

Spiegelman does not even hesitate to disclose the limits of his project, not only highlighting the arbitrariness of many of his choices but also studding the narrative with self-referential considerations on the difficulty of adequately representing a reality of such graveness and so distant in time and space. As he affirmed in an interview, “essentially, the number of layers between an event and somebody trying to apprehend that event through time and intermediaries is like working with flickering shadows. It's all you can hope for.” (qtd. in Brown, 1988: 98) On this regard, it is useful to quote a brief excerpt from *Modernity and Ambivalence* by Zygmunt Bauman, which expounds upon the spirit of Spiegelman's memoir: “Postmodernity is modernity reconciled to its own impossibility and determined – for better or worse, to live with it.” (1993: 98)

In his work, Spiegelman emphasizes the subjectivity of both the testifier and the historian/biographer, renouncing to reconstruct an authoritative, monolithic version of history, proposing instead a series of stories, each of which is accredited and, at the same time, challenged by the very same protagonists and narrators. Through these stories, Spiegelman places the ontological and epistemological aspects of the historical research on the same level, interrogating himself not only on how much could have actually happened, but also on the circumstances and the modality of the transmission of survivors' memory and its role in traditional historiography.

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