

Narrative Techniques in Art Spiegelman's Graphic Novel *Maus*

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Abstract: This study will focus on identifying the most effective narrative techniques used by Art Spiegelman in his graphic novel *Maus*, begun in 1973 and completed in 1991, and analyzing them from a literary theorist's perspective. Up to a certain point, they will be separated from the visual techniques that enable the reader to understand Spiegelman's dramatic account of the Holocaust in World War Two.

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Since literary genres and species have become more and more hybrid in postmodernism, graphic novels establish themselves as landmarks of visual narratives. They gain public praise, as well as cultural recognition from critics. Their mixed structures and techniques, involving texts and images, scenarios and drawings, are frequently debated in literary theory or cultural studies. Some theorists notice the inevitable insertion of comics and graphic novels into mainstream literature, speaking of "cultural legitimacy" and "institutionalization" (Miller 2007: 41), while others insist on their sociological value and their influence on local and global cultures (Inge 1990: xvii).

As a result, comics and graphic novels are included on a regular basis in dictionaries and encyclopedias of literary theory, such as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005). Their historical importance as hybrid products that meet the critics' artistic expectations, as well as their growing popularity do not get unnoticed: "The graphic novel, an extended narrative geared towards adult readers and incorporating both texts and images, has gained followers since the 1980s." (Ewert 2005: 72)

When it comes to the specifics of comics and graphic novels, often regarded by critics and historians as a "9th art" (Lacassin 1982), their hybrid means of expression are on top of the list. The mélange between visual and narrative techniques is illustrative to a new form of art close to both graphics and fiction. In Thierry Groensteen's terms, hybridization should be perceived as an asset of *bande dessinée*:

Le caractère hybride de la bande dessinée apparaît à ceux qui la connaissent plus intimement non comme une tare, mais comme l'un de ses principaux atouts. La

bande dessinée a ce privilège merveilleux de marier le dessin et le verbe, l'expression plastique et la narration, la simultanéité et la temporalité. Plus d'un romancier en conçoit une certaine envie. (Groensteen 2006: 32)

Maus tells the (graphic) story of three traumatic events in the life of Vladek Spiegelman, an esteemed member of the Jewish community in Pre-War Poland: the dissolution of the community's social and cultural identity before World War Two; the ethnic genocide perpetuated by the Nazis in ghettos and concentration camps during World War Two; the effects of the psychological damage experienced by survivors of the Holocaust decades after the end of World War Two. All along Spiegelman's 296 pages story, a mixture of unconventional graphic and narrative techniques testifies to *Maus*' hybrid, paradoxical aspect: not entirely fiction, not fully graphic art; both fiction and graphic art. This unusual melting pot of styles and techniques is explained by Christin Galster in her analysis of hybrid genres:

Hybrid novels [...] combine, transform, and subvert the conventions of several narrative sub-genres; break down the boundaries between fiction, poetry, and drama; import non-literary discourses and text-types; and employ narrative strategies that strive to imitate the organizing principles of painting, music, and film. (Galster 2005: 227)

One can identify two main fictional techniques illustrative of *Maus*' hybrid aspect: *narrative self-referentiality* and *metanarrative self-consciousness*. Often intertwined, they enable the reader to access a multi-layered postmodern network of "real" and "fictional" events which depict the individual and collective tragedy of Jews under Hitler's Nazi regime.

Self-referentiality provides *Maus* with extra plausibility, as it uses the first-person testimony, in connection with real names and verifiable facts, as a narrative backup of historical truths. For instance, Artie, the anthropomorphic mouse who tells one of the novel's stories, is also Art Spiegelman, son of Vladek, survivor of the real Auschwitz (but also of the "imaginary" Mauschwitz drawn in another story encapsulated in the novel). In a graphic novel called *Maus*, whose *real* author he is, Artie (aka Art) depicts his father's imprisonment, deportation, and escape from the deadly Nazi concentration camp. The *historical, documentary* quality of the novel matches its graphic achievements and enables *Maus* to become one of the most treasured products of popular culture. As cultural theorist Douglas Wolk states:

To collect comic books is to treasure them as physical artefacts – not just vehicles for stories, but primary documents that tell us something about our history as well as their own. (Wolk 2007: 3)

However, Artie's narrative ambiguous status (real author and self-referential character in his own graphic novel) sometimes proves to be too difficult to handle. Consequently, questions arise, still in the form of a first-person narrative, challenging the assumption that the mimetic relation between life and fiction is a clear-cut one: "...It's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about him...", Artie tells Mala, Vladek's wife in Post-War U.S.A. "In

some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserable old Jew." (Spiegelman 2003: 133)

Identifying, deconstructing, and explaining racial or ethnic stereotypes via a biographical, self-referential narrative perspective makes the real author's task more difficult than expected. At the same time, it provides the reader with a valuable social insight, as the cultural debate is initiated by the very son of the Holocaust's survivor: both in real life and in the novel. On such occasions, *self-referentiality* triggers an emotional response from the reader, as he or she gets persuaded that the issue debated is not simply a fictional addendum to the Holocaust's graphic story, but also an uncomfortable truth of everyday life.

The discussion about the limits of graphic and narrative *mimesis* via first-person self-conscious references turns out to be one of *Maus*' focal points. Artie seems often ill-at-ease with his hybrid work of fictionally imagining and drawing pictures of tragic events that had happened in real life. How is he going to do it? Which graphic and narrative styles should he use? How will his father, the "real" Vladek Spiegelman in the novel *Maus*, as well as his fictional *aka* in the meta-novel *Maus* embedded into the novel *Maus*, react to Artie's representational solutions?

Using *mise-en-abîme* is one way of dealing with such conflicting issues. For instance, when talking to his father and Mala, Artie chooses to show them sketches from his work-in-progress graphic novel depicting Jews hanged by Nazis in the Polish town of Sosnowiec (Spiegelman 2003: 134-35). But these are *precisely* the drawings shown to the reader in panels number 4, 5 and 6 of page 85 in the novel. This abyssal technique enables the reader to imagine (that is, to mentally review the hanging scene previously noticed at page 85) an event to which he or she has no direct access, as Artie turns the drawings *only* to Vladek and Mala (Spiegelman 2003: 135).

Deconstructing *mimesis* by means of *self-irony* is another way of casting doubt on the efficiency of mirroring reality in a graphic fiction. The novel's chapter called *Mauschwitz* (a hybrid reference to a realistically inspired, yet fictionally depicted Auschwitz of mice) provides the reader with an insight on Artie's troubles of representing reality in a novel. How could one reproduce the Holocaust in a semi-realistic graphic style, without minimizing the tragedy and offending the victims? Why choose anthropomorphic animals, instead of humans as characters? *This* is the mimetic issue Artie debates with his girlfriend, Françoise, in a dialogue filled with dark humor and dramatic self-irony: "What are you doing?" "Trying to figure out how to draw you..." "Want me to pose?" "I mean in my book. What kind of *animal* should I make you?" "Huh? *A mouse*, of course!" (Spiegelman 2003: 171)

However empathic to the victims, Françoise's answer does not solve the mimetic dilemma: how to best represent the Holocaust in an original, still non-offensive graphic form? Should the Jews be represented as mice? What about someone who is French, but converted to Judaism? The dialogue between the pair adds psychological value to the narrative, since the tragi-comical jokes made by descendants of the survivors are rather a means of coping with their *own* inherited traumas, than a way of minimizing the gravity of the Holocaust: "I've got it!... Panel one: my father is on his exercycle... I tell him I just married

a frog... Panel two: he falls off his cycle in shock. So you and I go to a mouse rabbi. He says a few magic words and *zap!*... By the end of the page the frog has turned into a beautiful *mouse!*" (Spiegelman 2003: 172) Intertextual paneling provides a possible narrative solution to Artie's self-ironic socio-aesthetic dilemma. (Eisner 2008: 11-16; McCloud 2006: 15-16) The debate is closed, since the reader has already been given an option: a panel with a grumpy, mouse-looking Vladek Spiegelman pedaling on his exercycle is present at the beginning of the novel (Spiegelman 2003: 25). As a result, the graphic doubts expressed by Artie about the meta-novel *Maus*, drawn by him while also being a character in Art Spiegelman's novel *Maus* (which challenges the same mimetic limitations), may be considered post-factual narrative reminders of the meta-author's and the real author's initial graphic choices.

Finally, *self-referentiality* allows both the real author and the meta-author of the novel(s) to turn unreliable story-telling subjectivity (an intrinsic feature of first-person narratives) into its opposite: reliable narrative objectivity, often required by the reader when it comes to dealing with verifiable historical events projected in an imaginary environment. When a first-person narrative's subjective perspective is undermined by the very relativization of its assumptions, an unexpected "objective" point of view arises from the fabric of the text. The same goes with graphics. The postmodern technique of annotating a panel via the narrator's self-referential scenario-like comments adds real life plausibility to scenes which may seem purely fictional to the reader.

Let us consider Art's visit to his psychiatrist, Pavel. Art is no longer Artie (Vladek's small kid, and later a youngster incapable of fully understanding his father's tragic history), but a traumatized adult in severe need of psychological assistance. While getting it, he cannot help but asking himself if he is doing the right thing when "reproducing" the content of his sessions with Pavel in a graphic meta-novel. "His place is overrun with stray dogs and cats.", notices Art, who always shrinks to the shape of a little boy when knocking at Pavel's door. "Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?" (Spiegelman 2003: 203) A "framed photo of pet cat" sitting in plain view on the therapist's desk is also relativized by the author of the meta-novel, who promptly "annotates" the panel with an ironic "off" comment: "Really!" (Spiegelman 2003: 203) Such self-referential "notes" not only help the novel's *meta* dimension to acquire an almost autonomous status in *Maus*, but also give the reader the impression that he or she witnesses a "true", "honest" psychological struggle that takes place in the author's real life.

Metanarrative self-consciousness is another narrative technique frequently used by Art Spiegelman in his novel. (Spiegelman 2011) It provides the reader with an artefactual perception on reality and its graphic "copies": drawn reality and drawn reality within drawn reality. From a representational perspective, *Maus* can be perceived as *Meta-Maus* (via a second-degree reality: the graphic novel within the real graphic novel) and a *Meta-Meta-Maus* novel (via a third-degree reality: the sketches and the scenario-like indications of the graphic novel within the real graphic novel). A narrative convention consisting of multiple conscious and self-conscious references pointing to the public can be identified throughout the whole novel. The reader is thus invited to accompany

each step of the representational processes. He or she becomes a textual witness to the very making of the multi-layered fabric of "reality": constructed and deconstructed, built up and torn down.

Such are the rules of metanarratives: by means of artefactual self-consciousness, the reader should be able to identify how characters exist within their fictional environment, while still being aware of their artificial status. The textual and iconic representations of reality acquire autonomy, as narrators play an active role in the novel's unfolding of events:

The metanarrative frame concerns the organization of the narrative as a text, including the narrator's means of identifying parts of its structure. Accompanying gestures are deictic (e.g., pointing to places in the space in front of the speaker associated with aspects of the plot) or metaphoric, representing an image of (a part of) the narrative as an abstract entity. (McGregor 2005: 206)

Metanarrative self-consciousness cannot be understood without considering two questions. Both are related to *narrative identity*; both evade an easy answer. Firstly: *who* is conscious of *what*? Secondly: *who* is conscious of being *who*?

In *Maus*, the *real* author, Art Spiegelman, and his *real* father, Vladek Spiegelman, are referred to as conscious persons existing or having existed in *real* life. At the same time, they are self-conscious (auto)fictional characters going by the same names as in *real* life. Finally, they are self-conscious (auto)fictional characters discussing their (auto)fictional existence in a graphic novel within a graphic novel rendering "real" events that had happened in their *real* lives. And they still go by their *real* names, biographically verifiable. Reality and its *meta* levels prove difficult to tell apart; however, their layered narrative and graphic display, filled with the characters' self-conscious references, has a persuasive effect on the reader.

On some occasions, *metanarrative self-consciousness* subverts the unfolding of "real" events in different textual layers. At the beginning of *Maus*, Vladek forbids his son to write about several intimate aspects of his life: "But this I just told you – about Lucia and so – I don't want you should write this in your book." (Spiegelman 2003: 25) Nevertheless, the cautioning happens just as the scenes that are not supposed to be told occur in the graphic novel that Art is developing in the combined timeframe of old memories and present storytelling. Since publicly "telling the truth" comes first in self-conscious autofiction, narrative ethics are being disregarded by both the "real" author and his (meta)fictional *aka*. In a similar manner to that of "the Author" in Camil Petrescu's novel *Patul lui Procust* (1933), the characters' wishes for privacy are simply ignored in *Maus*. Sensitive memories, which were not meant to leave Vladek's room, are disclosed to the reader just as Art promises the opposite: "...I can tell you other *stories*, but such private things, I don't want you should mention." (Vladek) "Okay, okay – I promise." (Art) (Spiegelman 2003: 25)

On other occasions, *metanarrative self-consciousness* adds plausibility to the unfolding of "real" events in the multi-layered novel. Art writes down in a notebook the conversations he is having with Vladek (and candidly tells him

about them), just as they happen in the graphic novel in which both are protagonists and narrators (Spiegelman 2003: 135). He even persuades his father to become a character in the graphic novel that is being drawn as they speak: "I still want to draw that book about you... The one I used to talk to you about... About your life in Poland, and the War." (Spiegelman 2003: 14) Since the reader has already viewed the panel Art says he is about to draw, the "real" and *meta* layers of the novel converge in a hybrid graphic and narrative form illustrative of paradoxical timeframe simultaneity.

As far as the characters' fictional lives are concerned, *metanarrative self-consciousness* comes at a cost. One being aware of his or her artefactual status does not make personal issues easier to sort out; on the contrary. By default, characters in a comic book should not be able to notice the existence of the graphic *extradiegetic space* that surrounds them. However, exceptions occur, and they are related to self-referential narratives: "Of course characters are not expected to be aware of this space; only in self-referential exceptions characters deal with that aspect." (Lefèvre 2009: 160)

Seeing beyond the frame of the artefactual world has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, you are not "real", thus not subjected to the pressures of everyday life. On the other hand, you are longing to live the very "real" experiences you were denied. For example, during a conversation in their car, Art complains to Françoise about the limits of their fictional graphic world: "See what I mean... In real life you'd *never* have let me talk this long without interrupting." (Spiegelman 2003: 176)

Existential and artistic dilemmas get even worse when debating how to represent the Holocaust in a graphic form. Is a comic book suited for such a tragedy? Will it encompass the horrors endured by the victims? Art's ethical and psychological concerns do not receive a satisfactory answer. At the same time, the character's awareness of his fictional existence and of his work's artefactual status enhances the dramatism of the scene: "I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a *comic strip*! I guess I bit off more than I can chew. (...) There's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too *complex* for comics... So much has to be left out or distorted." (Spiegelman 2003: 176)

Fortunately for both the real author and his (meta)fictional narrative *alter egos*, Spiegelman's choice of anthropomorphic characters (Jews depicted as mice, Nazis as predatory cats, Poles as pigs, American as dogs etc.) has usually been welcomed by critics. It also has a respectable literary and iconic tradition. To quote popular culture theorist M. Thomas Inge:

When a contemporary artists like Art Spiegelman wants to treat the Holocaust, he resorts to the satiric tradition of animal fable and the imagery of funny animal comic books and animated cartoons in his work-in-progress *Maus*, the effect of which is to make the subject all the more terrifying because of the incongruity between theme and visual imagery. (Inge 1990: 12)

However, the ethical issues related to the portraying of real humans (victims or survivors of the Holocaust) as "funny" animals in *Maus* are not easy

to deal with. All of Spiegelman's (meta)narrators seem affected by a damaging guilt complex: that of apparently minimizing the tragedy of the Jewish people, via anthropomorphic representation. The multi-layered narrative structure of the novel (Art telling the story of his own life, as he is first writing down, then drawing his father's life story; Vladek telling Art his life story before and during World War Two; Vladek living in Post-War U.S.A., while telling Art his life story before and during World War Two) makes matters even more complicated. Where and how, in the novel, should there be an explanation satisfactory enough to ease the narrators' guilt and appease the public's feeling that the community was potentially offended?

Metanarrative self-consciousness once more gives a helping hand. Page 201 of the novel depicts *Maus*' real author, Art Spiegelman, sitting at his drawing desk, while dead bodies of anthropomorphic mice pile up in the room. Spiegelman is (self)drawn as a human, but he is also wearing the mask of a mouse, visibly tied behind his head. As tragic recollections unfold, *mimesis* gets deconstructed on multiple layers: Art is both the creator, and the victim character of his graphic "copy" of Vladek's "copy" of reality.

In an emotional confession, the (meta)author - (meta)character in his own novel connects real life and (meta)fiction to draw the public's attention to his own psychological trauma. After deciding to represent the Holocaust in an anthropomorphic form and publishing the resulting graphic novel, Art must cope with the psychological consequences of his aesthetic and ethic choices. Auto fictional *metanarrative self-consciousness* is the very technique which helps him come clean:

In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby... Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944, over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz... In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success. [...] In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) Lately, I've been feeling depressed. (Spiegelman 2003: 201)

Such self-referential confessions, which mix verifiable real-life events and their (meta)fictional graphic representations, not only enable Spiegelman's narrators to undergo *narrative therapy* in plain view of the readers, but also make the novel look more "authentic". For instance, in a (meta)metanarrative sequence of *Maus*, Art holds between his thumb and index a comic book story drawn in the expressionist style of Robert Crumb's *comix*. It shows a real photograph of little boy Spiegelman and his mother. The photograph in the comics' page within the graphic novel is also held between a drawn thumb and index, while the story's title, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet. A Case History*, refers to the *real* suicide of Art Spiegelman's mother in 1968 (Spiegelman 2003: 102). Reality inside fiction inside metafiction, comic books inside comic books, real photographs encapsulated in comics' pages encapsulated inside comics' pages (Duncan, Smith 2009: 129; 131) – these are the narrative means by which Spiegelman's graphic novel is made to be "authentic", "sincere", and reliable in terms of "truthful" storytelling.

In summary, the two main fictional techniques used by Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, *narrative self-referentiality* and *metanarrative self-consciousness*, testify to the novel's sophisticated degrees of realism. Firstly, they help build up complex, multilayered versions of reality. Secondly, they add plausibility to the drawn representations of these realities. And thirdly, they provide first-person story telling with psychological authenticity. All in a paper world within a paper world where characters live convincingly "real" and fictional lives. Consequently, *Maus* can be regarded as a polyvalent book: one which embodies the graphic conventions of popular culture, but also reshapes the narratives of mainstream literature. (Manolescu 2011: 148-150)

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