

МЕЃУНАРОДЕН ЦЕНТАР ЗА СЛАВЈАНСКА ПРОСВЕТА - СВЕТИ НИКОЛЕ

**«МЕЃУНАРОДЕН ДИЈАЛОГ: ИСТОК - ЗАПАД»**  
(ФИЛОЗОФИЈА, ЛИНГВИСТИКА, КУЛТУРОЛОГИЈА)

**СПИСАНИЕ**  
на научни трудови

**ТРИНАЕСЕТТА МЕЃУНАРОДНА  
НАУЧНА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЈА  
„МЕЃУНАРОДЕН ДИЈАЛОГ: ИСТОК - ЗАПАД“  
МЕЃУНАРОДЕН СЛАВЈАНСКИ УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ  
„ГАВРИЛО РОМАНОВИЧ ДЕРЖАВИН“  
СВЕТИ НИКОЛЕ - БИТОЛА**

**Година IX**

**Број 4**

**Јуни 2022**

- СВЕТИ НИКОЛЕ, Р. СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА -  
- 2022 -

**Издавач:** Меѓународен центар за славјанска просвета - Свети Николе

**За издавачот:** М-р Михаела Ѓорчева, директор

**Наслов:** «МЕЃУНАРОДЕН ДИЈАЛОГ: ИСТОК - ЗАПАД» (ФИЛОЗОФИЈА, ЛИНГВИСТИКА, КУЛТУРОЛОГИЈА)

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**Компјутерска обработка и дизајн:** /  
**ISSN (принт)** 1857-9299  
**ISSN (онлајн)** 1857-9302

**Адреса на комисијата:** ул. Маршал Тито 77, Свети Николе, Р. Северна Македонија

**Контакт телефон:** +389 (0)32 440 330

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**Печати:** Книжарница и печатница „Славјански“, Свети Николе

**Тираж:** 100

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„ИСТОК-ЗАПАД“**

*Achilleas Kleisouras*

**REMEMBERING THROUGH COMICS: THE QUEST FOR  
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**Achilleas Kleisouras, PhD Candidate**  
Special Technical Laboratory Staff  
National and Kopodistrian University of Athens  
Republic of Greece

## **REMEMBERING THROUGH COMICS: THE QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN ART SPIEGELMAN'S GRAPHIC NOVEL MAUS**

**ABSTRACT:** The study of memory in comics focuses primarily on the intersection of comics with memory culture and the ability of the medium to simulate or transmit memory. The way in which the intricate relationship between witnessing, testimony and memory is realized through narrative is examined more closely in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, first published as a complete volume in 1991. In *Maus*, the story of the survival of Spiegelman's father along with his written testimony, comprise a raw post-memory material that investigates the role memory plays in the representation of history. Even more, this biographic/autobiographic story deals with the issue of transgenerational trauma as well as the ambiguity and tension that may arise between personal and collective memories. The past, and the search for truth, become the cornerstones of a narrative structure which is based on representational modes or styles of drawing. By such means, narrative memory can function as a vessel in the formation of Spiegelman's identity, in a familial but also broader, social context.

**KEY WORDS:** *Maus*, comic, memory, postmemory, identity, narration

### **INTRODUCTION**

The broad theme of this paper is the intersection of comics with memory culture and the examination of the possibilities the comic medium has to offer, when interpreting and depicting sensitive issues that deal with memory and postmemory, transgenerational trauma, and the problematic of Holocaust representation. More specifically, the paper focuses on *Maus*, a graphic novel created by Art Spiegelman that portrays, in comic form, on one hand the tale of a survivor, and on the other, the autobiographical story of his son. The paper examines the various ways that this graphic novel achieves narrative maturity as well as 'legitimization', so to speak, by incorporating, combining and transcending traditional historical documentation methods of memory transmission, such as oral and written testimony, as well as photographs and films. Spiegelman is able to achieve this by creating a biographic/autobiographic narrative of trauma, that complies with the structure of the comic form and employs the characteristics of the comic genre. This allows him to approach historical events and transgenerational trauma from a new perspective in order to articulate the tension that may arise between memory and post memory, and comprise an alternative narrative with respect to the presentation of history. The paper concludes that the narrative in *Maus* can help constitute a narrative of memory, which in effect becomes a vessel in the search for truth, personal as well as collective; through remembering, Spiegelman sets on a journey to understand and define his identity, in a familial but also broader, social context.

## BODY OF THE PAPER

Over the course of the last two decades, we have seen a rapid growth in the field of memory studies which led to the formulation of concepts such as cultural memory, postmemory, prosthetic memory and multidirectional memory. These are all concepts aimed to examine the many different ways in which memory functions and manifests itself, but also that take into account what we could call 'technologies of memory' such as photographs, films, to a large extent today social media, as well as comics (Catala Carrasco et al. 12). A recent addition to these which is also seeking 'academic legitimization', so to speak, is a concept that has been coined as comics memory (Nijdam 86). Unlike work which primarily focuses on the intersection of comics and memory i.e., the role of memory in comics, or how memory is represented in the medium, this new field deals with the way that different 'kinds' of memory tend to interact (Ahmed and Crucifix 2).

The medium of comics is unique: not only can it mobilize the past in particularly challenging and productive ways, but it can contribute to the realization of a largely untapped potential of memory. The medium's distinct characteristics and essential building blocks such as drawing style, coloring, lettering etc. can become traces of bodily memory (Ahmed and Crucifix 2), and therefore function, I suggest, as catalysts bringing to light stored information that transcends the limitations of conscious recollection.

Maus was originally created by Art Spiegelman in 1980. It is the story of a Holocaust survivor narrated by the son of the survivor who happens to be the artist himself. The first six chapters of Maus were published in book format in 1986 and the first volume had the telling subtitle: 'My father bleeds history'. The second volume, Maus II, was published with five more chapters, in 1991. Provocative as it may seem as a generic choice to use the comic medium in order to portray the history of the Holocaust, an even more striking feature in Maus is that Spiegelman chose to use animals in order to present his father's story of survival and his own life as a child of survivors (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 9). In his graphic novel, human beings are depicted as mice, cats, pigs and other animals: mice are used to depict the Jews who were the victims, cats to portray the German soldiers and pigs to represent the Poles (Spiegelman, "Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My father bleeds History" 22, 28, 33); the French are represented as frogs, the Americans as dogs and the British as fish (Spiegelman "Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began" 93, 99, 131).

The use of metaphor by Spiegelman, however, must be understood within the overall concept and structure of Maus: we are not really confronted by animals playing people's roles but by humans who wear animal masks. Through the guise of an animal fable, Spiegelman aims to tackle and undermine Hitler's vermin metaphor: the horror of a racial theory is not rationalized or supported by the metaphor but, on the contrary, it is brought to its' fullest and most awful realization (Brown 1998). By using the form of animals to recount the story of his father's survival of the Holocaust, Spiegelman is able then to assert more convincingly the truth of the Jews vulnerability, in the same way that mice are vulnerable in the presence of cats (Drag 227).

In order to narrate his story, Spiegelman chose the comic form which, in the eyes of many critics, is not a 'serious' enough medium and lacks the 'credibility' to deal with such a disquieting issue as the Holocaust. However, to present the tale of a survivor in this form, is in fact an effective response to the challenges posed by Holocaust representation -up to that point- and by doing so Spiegelman transgresses the idea

of decorum (i.e. the unspoken principal that relates to the appropriate matching of topic and genre). Furthermore, the dialogic structure of the narrative allows for many different stories to unfold: of the father and his wife, of friends and sons, among others. As these stories are woven together, they form the basis for the synthesis of a collective memory (Fernandez Gil 244-248); this memory, up to that point, had only been implied by personal, familial and collective symptoms of an unspoken trauma.

Spiegelman addresses head-on the question of how the Holocaust can be represented through an interaction between a variety of different media (such as comics, photographs and testimony), in order to transcend the immobilizing effect of the photograph and documentary film, two mediums that had immersed people in visual imagery of extraordinary power and had, in effect, silenced them verbally (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 9, 10). Viewed as a documentary in comic form, *Maus* is able to achieve multiple and distinct levels of commentary of the survivor's -Spiegelman's father- experience. Underneath the visual surface, the pages of the graphic novel contain different kinds of information. Hillary Chute, a scholar with important work in the field of comic studies, has argued that the 'boxes' comprising a page of comics, store and display information in a way that is intimately linked with the idea of the archive (Chute 181, 192). But the archival process in *Maus*, instead of culminating into a repository of evidence, becomes in effect something dynamic; it reveals the tension, as well as the interaction, between the visual (which includes the photographs that were incorporated in the comic as well as the drawings), the written, and the oral and how these express the memory of the eyewitness and of the secondary witness in order to create a completely new testimonial archive (Chute 193).

It has been argued that, due to their aestheticizing tendencies, visual representations have a diminished power to convey horror. The aesthetic quality of a photograph or film that projects reality becomes, in a way, a protective barrier between the viewer and that which is real. Even more, after repeatedly looking at a horrific photograph or film, the viewer is prone to build up a certain psychological resistance with a desensitizing effect in order to survive the horror of looking, so to speak. With the use of the comic form, Spiegelman is able to produce a multilayered narrative that can approach the problematics of Holocaust representation and to transcend the distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic. By replacing documentary photographs with drawings of mice and cats in order to tell the story, Spiegelman is able to discard the protective function of the aesthetic and lay the viewer bare to the reality of what actually took place as this is constantly 'debated' and formulated on an opposing axis of testimony vs fiction (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 11) or, of what is remembered vs what actually happened.

This process, according to Hirsch, represents in *Maus* the aesthetic of the trauma fragment, a testimonial 'chain' which is characterized by an aesthetic indistinguishable from the documentary form. The frames of the comic are connected to each other in order to form an invisible 'chain' linking together two separate chronological levels, the past and the present, which structure the narrative of the story (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 26).

Through this process, complemented by the spoken testimony of Spiegelman's father, a peculiar narrative of remembering is constructed which is able to articulate and represent in a most profound way life, death, loss and mourning. It is most probable, that the power of this narrative of trauma which is presented in *Maus*, lies not so much in the ability to evoke memory, as it does in its' capacity to provide to the reader the



opportunity to fill in what has been discarded by memory over the years, in an effort to cope with the trauma of an unspeakable horror. It offers then, the necessary context to rescue personal memory and its' gaps (Pintor 133). To be sure, children of those directly affected by collective trauma, like Spiegelman, tend to inherit a horrific, unknown and unknowable past; their fiction, art, memoir, and testimony often represent the effects of living, over a prolonged period of time, in close proximity to pain, and is steeped in feelings of loss (Hirsch "The Generation of Postmemory" 112): loss of a home, of a family and of a feeling of belonging in the world that may, in effect, lead also to question one's sense of identity.

In order to understand how memory can be graphically represented in a medium such as comics, it is important to briefly become acquainted with one of the medium's unique characteristics. Comics can use the panel structure and the 'gutter' -which is the space between panels- to allow for multiple temporal instances, which means that it can allow the reader to 'move' back and forth in time (McCloud 66, 94-104). This distinct feature of the comic medium allows for a series of negotiations between the reader and the pages of the comic that contain the text and image (or the image alone), negotiations that concern what path the reader has to take when engaging with the narration of time. Such a negotiation can also allow for a suspension of blotting out individual memories, experiences and interpretations, both verbal and visual, something prone to happen when there is a dominant, 'official' version of the story that is presented (Pines 185).

Even more, the juxtaposition of frames on the page, calls overt attention to the basic grammar of the medium of comics involving selection i.e. the specific rhythm that is created by what is displayed and what is discarded, in order to create a deliberately unsynthesized collision of style. In the case of *Maus*, this constant shift between the representational and the non-representational as well as the disjunctions between them, becomes the backbone of the graphic novel's narrative thread and the root of its' capacity to express horror (Chute 186, 193).

In comics, the discourse with the reader is something that takes place 'between the panels', beneath the narration or the dialogue. In collaboration with the distilled register of the cartoon and the drawn lines, it can create a world of expression that can be enveloping, idiosyncratic and very powerful, as is the case in *Maus*. A story with many narrative lines narrated in the comic medium has the ability to mobilize the 'fragment' of trauma in an effort to connect past and present. It can also bring forth the unreliability of memory and the hidden tensions between history (as it is remembered) and the truth. The past and the search for truth through the process of remembering, form the cornerstones of the narrative lines in *Maus*. It is this search for truth through memory, that becomes in effect a search for self and identity, personal as well as collective (Merino 3).

The narration in *Maus* is structured on two different levels that continually interchange from the very beginning to the end of the story. On one level, there is the fictionalized tale of the artist's real-life father Vladek, and all he had to endure as a Jew living in Poland during World War II and as a prisoner in a concentration camp in Auschwitz. On another level, it is the story of the strained relationship between a father and his son, living in the area of Queens in New York in the 1980's, the time of the graphic novel's creation. While *Maus* is in fact the story of the father's testimony and the son's attempt to transmit that testimony in the comic genre, it is also the story of the son's life, which is dominated by memories that are not his own. The graphic novel,

in true self-reflective fashion, speaks also of Spiegelman's struggle as he tries to deal with these memories that have haunted him all his life and as he tries to mediate and transform them through his own idiosyncratic graphic representation and aesthetic choices in the form of comics (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 12).

Through the use of comic images and testimony placed in balloons, Spiegelman is reconstructing the memory of his father; This is achieved through the sketches which represent the orality and dialogues of Vladek as he recounts his tale to his son Art. This verbal construct permits truth to be analyzed from another perspective, using testimonial as a literary device for representing memory. Although Spiegelman, the comic artist is the narrator, it is the father, Vladek, who becomes both protagonist and narrator for most part of the graphic novel. The representation of memory in *Maus* then, depends on Vladek's testimonial. It is important to note, however, that Vladek is not directly narrating these events to us; the narrator is his son Art, the creator of the comic, who in fact remembers and recounts his father's remembering. In this way, Art individualizes the voice of his father and offers another kind of memory that is mediated through his father's memories. This is what is called postmemory, a concept first introduced by Marriannne Hirsch (Hirsch "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" 8, 18). Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their birth; these memories were transmitted to them and have a lasting and powerful effect as they constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch "The Generation of Postmemory" 103). In *Maus*, the narrators are father and son, first and second generations, and their conversations, as depicted in comic form, illustrate how familial postmemory works through the transformations and mediations from the father's memory to the son's postmemory (Hirsch "The Generation of Postmemory" 119). In order to investigate and illuminate the thread between the two, Spiegelman uses in his narration the process of the testimonial chain which allows him to link two separate chronological levels, the father's past and the son's present.

It has been argued that *Maus* represents to the comic world what Proust's work represented to literature (Merino 10). *Maus* achieves narrative maturity by exploring the multi-faceted content of memory and in the process delivers to the reader a multiple content: testimonial, autobiography, history and personal memoir. Just as France was constructed in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in *Maus* collective suffering is constructed in Vladek's individual story. His first-person narrative and the memory of his suffering is multiplied and accompanied by the silenced memory of millions who suffered the same things. The drawings in *Maus* undertake the task to reproduce, just as in Proust's prose, the narrative of memory which has materialized in the present life of the adult Art Spiegelman at the time that he created his comic (Merino 3).

The narration in *Maus* reflects the tension between individuals, their culture and their past. Through memory, it becomes possible to recover and narrate a universal drama and to share each moment of suffering; *Maus* engages in a dialogue with individuals and their perspective of the present. Vladek's story needs to be told because it is the collective story of millions; but it also needs to be told because of the familial implications that exist within it. For Spiegelman, the son of a survivor, it seems imperative to find the appropriate 'space' to express his father's story and bring to light the memories it contains; he needs his father's memory to construct his own identity because memory is fundamental in the constitution of his ego. In the panels of *Maus*,

Spiegelman attempts to fuse history and fiction in order to constitute an identity which is based on the act of remembering (Merino 2, 4).

It is most telling that Spiegelman chooses to explore memory by employing a narrative of imagery. It is reported, at least in many philosophers' accounts, that an item always specified as being present when remembering occurs is an image. William James thought that a necessary ingredient of memory is "the revival in the mind of an image or copy of the original event", and Bertrand Russell goes as far as to posit that "memory demands an image" (Malcolm 59).

It can be argued that the underlying current running along the narrative of Maus is the search for identity through the process of remembering. As the meaning of one's experience materializes in memory, the historicity of the ego becomes very important and, it can be argued, only he who has a memory will be able to form an identity that is characterized by constancy and continuity. But, in this quest for identity, it seems that Spiegelman needs first to unearth the memory of someone else: his father. Only in the process of establishing a meaningful link between his father's memory and his own postmemory, will he be able to encounter the missing or seemingly 'vacant' pieces of memory lying dormant within the narrative of trauma. And, to paraphrase the famous saying by Aristotle, identity-like nature- abhors a vacuum too. It could be argued that all human beings are compelled to try and fill this 'identity vacuum' with a plausible narration.

The vital link between identity and narrative has been recognized by many scholars, beginning with Paul Ricoeur who first founded the concept of a 'narrative identity' (Ricoeur "Narrative Identity" 73). Ricoeur understands identity as the durable character of an individual that is based on a life story and whose coherence is imposed by plot. It seems then, that we understand our-selves and our place in the world, our identity that is, by interpreting our lives as if they were narratives. And it this unique interpretation and meaning of one's own life experience that in the end materializes and becomes the memory of the life that has been lived.

## CONCLUSION

In the graphic novel Maus, the meaning of Vladek Spiegelman's experience has been stored in memories pregnant with trauma. This trauma has been silenced over a prolonged period of time and has been inherited in the postmemory of his son. Art Spiegelman feels compelled to use the power of the comic medium in order to unearth this traumatic content of postmemory. To do so, he constructs a personal, familial and collective tale employing the comic form and genre, and consequently embarks on a quest to discover his own identity. This quest is in essence an effort to define himself and his people through the act of remembering. However, in order to achieve this, Spiegelman will be needing the mediation of the narrative function; through various means, he constructs a multilayered and dynamic plot, developed on different temporal levels. By choosing to structure the story of Maus on a narrative of memory, he is able to exemplify that, in the process of making ourselves, we first have to turn our lives into stories. A view that Paul John Eakin succinctly and eloquently encapsulated in words, when he wrote: "narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity; it is an identity content" (Eakin 100).

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