Ethical Dilemmas of Trauma Representation; Considering Art Spiegelman as a Liminal Mediator

Abstract: Theodor Adorno famously proclaims that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (285). Undoubtedly, he does not attempt to silence narratives of the Holocaust through this oft-cited remark. With this paradox began a conversation that proceeds to this day and resulted in a paradigm that haunts all trauma narratives: “who has the right to speak or write? What are the appropriate forms for their utterance to take?” and finally, “who is speaking, to whom, on whose behalf, and in what context?” (Godard 18). An author inevitably distorts and modifies an original traumatic experience by inserting his voice into the narrative via stylistic choices, formatting, narration, etc. By default, he is thus positioned as a liminal mediator between the experiencer of the story and the reader. He must ethically avoid distortions of the subject’s story, despite such responsibility creating a difficult paradox to resolve. I consider this conflict through Art Spiegelman’s Maus volumes I and II. Maus raises the same questions of censorship, authorship, and responsibility through its subject matter of the Holocaust and its medium as a graphic novel. I focus primarily on Art, the narrator, as a mediator between Spiegelman the author, his father, mother, and the written page.

Keywords: trauma narratives; graphic novels; Holocaust literature; narration; collaborative literature; ethics of storytelling.

Theodor Adorno famously proclaims that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (285). Undoubtedly, Adorno does not attempt to silence narratives of the Holocaust through this oft-cited remark. Robert Kaufmann adds that “Adorno had actually, if naively, imagined that his barbed, tensile aphorism, provocation though it surely was, would nonetheless straightforwardly join other immediate postwar efforts to make thought and writing grapple with and palpably enact a questioning of the meanings of humanity’s “after-living” — its survival—of the 1933–1945 Third Reich” (117). Via this argument, grappling with the moral implications of an event such as the Holocaust is a ‘barbaric’ endeavour by nature of what Adam Brown (2013) labels as the inability to “speak
the unspeakable” and “represent the unrepresentable” (14). Klaus Hofmann marks the struggle of “whether and how a poem can possibly be written after Auschwitz persists and it pervades Adorno’s writing” (184). In critiquing the act of writing poetry, Adorno condemns the failure of culture and life in the face of events such as the Holocaust. The question is, then, how can one write after the Holocaust? And if so, what form can this utterance take?

Rolf Tiedemann (2005) asserts Adorno “did not wish to forbid any poet to write poetry, innocent as such an activity is, particularly when it is compared to the atrocities committed by others; he insisted merely that writing poetry before Auschwitz and writing poetry after Auschwitz were separated by an unbridgeable gulf” (xvi). He adds, “a sense of shame prevented Adorno from ‘writing elegantly about Auschwitz’.” (xi). In this view, the historical connotation with the poetry art form is strictly oppositional to the essence of what the genocide was. A shame embedded in the fortune to live past Auschwitz marks the ethical and moral obligations in depicting such tales of indescribable horror through a commonly ‘pleasurable’ form. Though often misconstrued, the word ‘barbaric’ in this context references a lack of ability to translate onto a physical medium, poetry or otherwise, such a devastating experience of immeasurable suffering and absolute failure of humanity and culture. Jonathan Druker explains this perspective “speaks to the possible inadequacy of language for representing such enormous suffering” (53). Language, beyond form even, fails. He proceeds, “under the conditions that effectively enlisted high culture to make the Nazi genocide thinkable, Adorno fears just four years after the end of the war, that the kind of poetry we need is dead or never lived…it would reflect on the knowledge that the most refined art might also be the most insidiously barbaric” (53). The question of how an extermination of this calibre based on no pragmatic means whatsoever (e.g., Bauer 2010, 2014) could occur in the first place unsettles the foundations of the world in which poetry as we perceive it can be possible. In this context, the author faces the ethical challenges of writing amid these post-Holocaust times, which according to Adorno, inherently face inadmissibility in reflecting on a history that is beyond reasoning and the realm of understanding.

Hirsch (1992) notes that “despite his own careful reconsidereations and restatements, Adorno’s radical suspicion has haunted writing for the last forty years” (9). Nearly four decades later, survivor Primo Levi responds to Adorno’s famous ‘dictum’ by claiming that “after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry except about Auschwitz” (230). Interpretations of this refute reference a
fundamental consensus in the field of Holocaust Studies: “that the question of if the Holocaust should be represented has given way to how it should be portrayed” (Brown 24). The disagreement between the two authors discerns the inability, and yet necessity, to continue speaking narratives of such trauma.

With this paradox began a conversation that proceeds to this day and resulted in a paradigm that haunts all trauma narratives: “who has the right to speak or write? What are the appropriate forms for their utterance to take?” and finally, “who is speaking, to whom, on whose behalf, and in what context?” (Godard 18). While feminist critic Barbara Godard’s remark is several decades old, and its subject is the politics of representing Indigenous women’s voices, the questions she raises remain an imminent response to Adorno’s conflict. An author inevitably distorts and modifies an original traumatic experience by inserting his voice into the narrative via stylistic choices, formatting, narration, etc. By default, he is thus positioned as a liminal mediator between the experiencer of the story and the reader. He must ethically avoid distortions of the subject’s story, despite such responsibility creating a problematic paradox to resolve. In this work, I consider this paradox through Art Spiegelman’s *Maus vol I and II*. *Maus* raises the same questions of censorship, authorship, and responsibility through its subject matter of the Holocaust and its medium as a graphic novel. I focus primarily on Art, the narrator, as a mediator between Spiegelman the author, his father, mother, and the written page. I am particularly interested in exploring Marianne Hirsch’s question that if indeed we concede to Adorno’s perspectives, where does that lend Spiegelman’s graphic novel and the images attached to it? (Hirsch 9)

**The Graphic Novel Genre meeting the Holocaust**

Notwithstanding the prestige, decorated accomplishments (Pulitzer and American Book awards), translation into nearly forty languages, and varied integrations into the curriculums of middle, secondary, and post-secondary institutions across North America, the astounding success of both *Maus* volumes was not an anticipated one, and to a degree, not an entirely embraced one either. Spiegelman admits he “didn’t expect, nor did the publisher, that it would ever be successful” (Spiegelman and Alvar 14:07). In fact, he appears troubled not only by the issues raised through the novel’s content but its newly entered realm of critical analysis (14:47). My aim to examine aspects of *Maus* may hence be contradictory to the intentions of its author, who pleads his work was seldom
designed to educate readers (Spiegelman and Alvar 13:29). Instead, he describes *Maus* as a therapeutic journey to accepting his identity as a second-generation victim (Spiegelman and Alvar). The usage of trauma narratives as a therapeutic journey to working through trauma is widely accepted by critics as one of many potential outcomes (e.g., Goldberg, 2006; Herman, 1992). As Hirsch (1992) reminds us, Spiegelman insisted that *Maus* was a non-fiction work (9).

In an interview, Spiegelman was asked if he “think[s] of [him]self as a writer,” referring to the unique characteristics of the graphic novel as a literary medium (Jacobowitz 51). He responded, “sure, and as a drawer- actually as someone who probably fails equally well at both” (Jacobowitz 51). The response distinguishes the act of storytelling with words from images and further renders them equally imperative by suggesting Spiegelman “fails equally well at both.” *Maus* can hardly be considered a ‘failure’. Instead, by offering this peculiar and ironic oxymoron to describe his writing, Spiegelman addresses the innate ineptitude of “representing the unrepresentable” (Brown 14). Narrating his father’s voice paves the path for Art, the narrator, to discover his own. He faces authorship conflicts as a mediator between Vladek and the physical page. To ‘succeed’ in representing this narrative would entail speaking for its subjects, an act Spiegelman cannot and will not commit.

Instead, the text serves as the author’s attempt to “come to terms with [his] father and his story” (Spiegelman and Alvar 1:36). He explains, “I had no relationship [with my father]...and this book afforded me that, giving me the relationship of interviewer and interviewee to replace son and father” (Spiegelman and Alvar 2:28). The layers that make up *Maus* are beyond simple differentiation between art and text, or narration and authorship. Hirsch (1992) reminds us that “testimony is contained in Vladek's voice, but we receive more than that voice: we receive Art's graphic interpretations of Vladek's narrative. This is a "survivor's tale" – a testimony – mediated by the child of this survivor through his own idiosynchratic representational and aesthetic choice” (12).

Despite the author’s reflections on his relationship with his father as “dysfunctional” and distant, the conversations that resulted in *Maus* must have been intimate and personal (Spiegelman and Alvar 2:21, 8:47). The relationship dynamic between father and son is formalized and traded. Writing about collaborative research as a practice, Alfred Kieser and Lars Leiner (2011) relevantly explain that “in communication concerning theory and methodology, the academics are the experts and the practitioners the laypersons. In
communication about processes in practice, it is the other way around” (16). To contextualize this perspective onto Maus, when the narratives themselves are shared and recorded by Vladek, he is then the expert. In terms of recording the material onto the physical page, Art Spiegelman mediates Vladek’s words. Understanding this dynamic suggests, as Kieser and Leiner explain, that when “one person transmits information that makes sense from his perspective, and the partner then decodes it in a way that makes sense on the basis of his or her frame of reference. If the knowledge elements about which the partners communicate are complex and if knowledge discrepancy is large, the initial common ground is small and in need of enlargement through cooperation information.” (16)

We are reminded that Spiegelman’s “representational choices are just that – choices” (Hirsch, 1992, 13). The irony lies in the implication that Art became better acquainted with his father as a formalized stranger than an intimate son, and as such social conventions appear reversed. This irony is further amplified by the success of Maus as a literary work and the project’s motive as therapeutic. Its success, as we will continuously discuss, questions the ethical tension of who can be considered the “expert” in the dynamic behind the text.

The graphic novel form, Spiegelman explains, might “sound like a peculiar choice”, but for him, it was “a natural one” (Spiegelman and Alvar 5:24). He adds, “in a comic you have various panels, those panels are each a unit of time. You see them simultaneously...that’s what Maus is about” (5:31). These advantages are distinctive to the graphic novel form and continue to reinstate Spiegelman as a mediator and the project as his perception of events. Maus is as invested in the present as it is in the past, one of its critical motifs being “the way the past and present intertwine” (Spiegelman and Alvar 5:27). Why, then, does Spiegelman himself predict the graphic novel might “sound like a peculiar choice”?

Frey and Noys (2010) argue “it still remains the case that comics are not generally considered to be legitimate objects of cultural analysis” (255). They marked Art Spiegelman’s Maus as revolutionary to the genre, and as such, through Spiegelman, “the very hybridity which had been used to condemn comics as a ‘bastard form’ was being used to celebrate the potential of this previously discredited art” (256). Many scholars have pointed to Spiegelman’s unique ability to utilize this hybridity to renavigate the graphic novel form (e.g., Fey & Noys, 2010; Hathaway, 2011; Schwarz, 2002; Gravett, 2013). Fey and Noys
go so far as to suggest this ability marked *Maus* as a “one-off” and, unfortunately, did little to attract critical attention to other works in the genre (256). Instead, I want to offer a different perspective on *Maus* which, in many ways, lends the work representative of the traditional superhero tropes for which comics have long been famous.

When you first think of the genre, you may be deceived into perceiving *Maus* as extraordinary to its conventional characteristics. If this is indeed the case, the medium presents yet another irony; despite narrating a tale of mice and men, *Maus* features no masked hero, no caped antagonist, and no idealization of man’s control over nature. The awareness of telling such a story in a text traditionally associated with masked vigilantes reveals a methodology in Spiegelman’s representation of his father. Despite displaying little to no interest in glamorizing his father as a survivor, it is a mistake to categorize *Maus* as unrelated to tropes associated with the medium. It is a distinct tale of good versus evil, men and monsters. Artie the narrator presents a desire to “tell the truth...what his father was really like” (Spiegelman and Alvar 13:14). Vladek is represented as a tyrannical figure, a difficult man from whom Art was distant throughout his life. Still, his character is nonetheless dynamic and complex. He is a flawed and humane hero, not unlike Bruce Wayne. His heroism reflects his survival from the Holocaust and his perseverance against all odds.

**Perceptions of Reality**

Moreover, as Spiegelman differentiates storytelling modes through image and text, *Maus* can also be considered an artwork in a more traditional sense. Spiegelman distinguishes the act of storytelling through pictures and words in various interviews (e.g., Spigelman and Alvar; Jacobowitz, 1994), as have many scholars since the first volume’s publication (e.g., Fey & Noys, 2010; Hathaway, 2011; Schwarz, 2002; Gravett, 2013). The graphic portion does as much ‘work’ for the narrative as the text. Another paradox unfolds as words may indicate one thing, and the image, another. Consider this excerpt from an interview:

**WOE:** There’s a photograph of your father towards the end of Maus II, the only real representation of him. He had a portrait taken of himself in a concentration camp uniform after the war. How was he able to put that clothing back on and sit for a portrait?

**SPIEGELMAN:** It looks like he had a fine time having that portrait taken - he looks rather cheerful in an odd way. It’s a troubling photo. The thing that’s interesting to
me about what you just said is that that was the only "real" representation of him. Somebody is doing a paper on the use of photographs in Maus. It's an interesting subject for me and one which should be weighed very carefully because, in some ways, a photo is a wonderfully baffling bit of almost surreality in the book. One's image of a Holocaust survivor is not as a proud wearer of a uniform who (at least in that photo) looks relatively healthy, but as someone haggard, dressed in rags, which he was several months prior. But nevertheless, that photo is screwy evidence of God knows what. And the Vladek in that photo certainly isn't the Vladek that I knew as his son, fifteen, twenty, or thirty years later (Jacobowitz 55).

Spiegelman appears more interested in the interviewer’s rhetoric than the question itself. While Vladek is consistently a critical element of both volumes – Maus is his story in many ways – it seems ironic that a photograph20 is deemed the “only real representation of him”; a photograph, which as Spiegelman notes, “certainly isn't the Vladek that [he] knew as his son, fifteen, twenty, or thirty years later”. The irony is further solidified through the inconsistency of representation in the ethics behind the photograph, an “image of a Holocaust survivor [who]...looks relatively healthy”, rather than “someone haggard, dressed in rags”. In terms of authenticity, this representation is clearly misleading; in other words, it is not “real” at all. By suggesting this final photograph is the only “real” representation of Vladek, the interviewer acknowledges: one, that varied representations of Vladek are present throughout the novel, and two, those are not quite as “real” (whatever that word means in this context). In that sense, Maus effectively introduces several representation dimensions: text, art, photography, live conversations, and tape recordings (Jacobowitz 56). While these layers play a fundamental role in the text’s global success (e.g., Hirsch, 1992; Schwarz, 2002), I want to emphasize the usage of the word ‘real’ in this context, and how these layers blur any potential objectivity of what it could mean.

Spiegelman continues to defy this notion of reality throughout the text, questioning the ethics of what a “real” representation is. Reality, particularly the perception of others, is evolving and subjective. Evolving, since the ‘reality’ of characters portrayed in the text continues to change as the narrative proceeds. As Spiegelman notes, for instance, the Vladek in the photograph was not the one he knew as his son ten, fifteen, or twenty years later. Hence the reality of the

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20 See image in Maus vol II, 294.
development of each character problematizes consistent character analysis throughout both volumes. How Art sees Vladek is one reality in the novel, and how Mala perceives him is another (which would be, in fact, Art’s impression of how Mala perceives Vladek). Through this perspective, the subjectivity of ‘reality’ is also evident. Part of the rich layers of the text emerges from the consistent reminders that Maus is a collaborative endeavour. As Hirsch (1992) reminds us, Spiegelman insisted the collection be considered non-fiction. The reference to the collaborative nature of the project is also evident through the process that resulted in it, a collection of recorded interviews between father and son. Though Art Spiegelman writes the story, he often voices his parents’ survival tale. The ambiguity of a collaborative work lies in the difficulty of identifying what is real, what is altered, removed, and added to the original experience.

Consider the renowned back cover image of the second volume as an example. Featuring a coloured panel of Art Spiegelman smoking a cigarette beside a drawing table, with the atrocities of the Holocaust haunting the narrator outside (literally) and inside (metaphorically and literally). In this panel, his identity as a second-generation victim is as inescapable as the act of writing Maus. An edition of Raw magazine on the wall (in which sections of Maus first appeared), followed by the cover of Maus vol I, a drawing table, and a collection of pens and ink continue to emphasize the tension of writing such a work. The consequences of writing Maus are inescapable either; Art’s haggard body language and an expression of contrition on his mouse mask. Scarce are the moments in Maus in which Art’s features are accentuated as visibly human. Scarce as they are, they render disjunction, displacement, and clear segregation between a Holocaust survivor and a second-generation victim. The mask’s weight is reiterated through the visibly human hands, the ear, and the tied bow behind the mask. That final measure further marks Art’s position as a mediator between Vladek’s story and the physical page. He is uncomfortably situated between the poster of Maus’ first publication in Raw magazine and the writing table; metaphorically and physically, a liminal figure between the tension of publication and writing. The Nazi ‘cat’ outside the window continues to remind readers the presence of the Holocaust haunting this second-generation victim. The mask and the face underneath solidify Spiegelman’s involvement in the narrative, establishing it as a representation of the events described.

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21 See back cover of Maus vol II.
composition of *Maus* as a therapeutic project introduces Art to the cost of wearing the mouse mask. The collective voices of ‘real’ mice, including Art’s family, is unattainable; he cannot (and will not) claim ownership of it. The panel distinguishes Art as the only family member who can never *be* a mouse. The mask functions as a bridge between Art and his family by allowing him to walk a mile in their shoes, so to speak.

Moreover, unlike the core narrative, this panel is coloured. This image demands readers’ attention by presenting itself as contrary to the black and white narrative. The paradox of realistic representation appears absurd and enigmatic. To juxtapose this panel to the one of Vladek in his uniform addresses yet again the subjectivity of reality in this framework. On the other hand, the mask undermines the representation’s authenticity. ‘Reality’, that is, what is a physical and authentic representation of characters and events, is simultaneously confirmed abstractly and undermined.

**The Price to pay**

The visible mask reappears in chapter two\(^{22}\) of the second volume. In one of the most striking moments of the collection, the page illustrates a depressed Art yet again writing on his desk above nude deceased bodies. The climactic photo similarly portrays the guilt and weight of the author’s responsibility as a mediator of collective and indescribable suffering. The act and consequences of writing appear more explicit than in the previous example. The function further persuades the reader to envision *Maus* beyond the hands of Art, and as a larger project. The differentiation in panel size disrupts a chronological reading of the page, and the reader is drawn immediately to the dramatic concluding panel. Compared to other panels, the final one is twice as large. As the panel size disrupts order, the flies weave the page together. While the graphic novel as a medium may allow Spiegelman to explore an image, imply an emotion, or voice a sound, to depict a smell is an arduous task to accomplish. Even before the reader realizes their source, flies circulate the page. Through implied scent, Spiegelman is haunted by the presence of the bodies on which his writing desk is situated. Perhaps *Maus* was an astonishing and unpredicted success, but this panel comes to question at what cost.

Guilt itself establishes *Maus* as a “collaborative” pursuit. While the image

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\(^{22}\) See chapter two, 41, *Maus* vol II.
displays Art’s struggle to accept the burden of telling a Holocaust narrative and his incapacity to empathize with it, the text juxtaposes his experiences with his father’s. Art is strategically placed at the top of a decomposing mass grave, marking his success on account of those below. In accepting the success of *Maus*, the mask becomes metaphorically heavier and more segregated from the face beneath it. As the outside world knocks on Art’s door with aspirations to commercialize the narrative, another level of mediation is referenced. Art remains a liminal presence.

In an interview with Marcia Alvar (2014), Spiegelman comments on the passage as follows: “the central image of that, a drawing table mounted on a pile of dead bodies, goes back exactly to *I’m drawing* on a pile of the dead, refers back to the problem of eliciting something that’s on some level pleasurable” (14:20). Spiegelman echoes Adorno, expressing guilt associated with conceiving an object of pleasure and success from unfathomable suffering and death. Consistent involvement in the novel as a narrator and a mediator distances him from the subjects of the narrative and further accentuates his role as ‘creator’. The act of writing echoes the burden of authorship, as the pen ultimately cannot be given to the dead. Metaphorically and literally, the discretion of their stories lies in his hands.

This conflict unites trauma narratives depicting crimes against humanity written by a mediator. Spiegelman sums this challenge as the inherent “problem in telling and not telling” (Spiegelman and Alvar 11:50). By “not telling”, we commit the grave crime of silence, which in turn leads to a lack of cultural and historical awareness (e.g., Zembylas and Bekerman 2008; Zembylas 2008; Brown 2014). Art ironically convicts Vladek of such a crime when his father confesses to burning Anja’s journals left behind for her son. He goes so far as to call his father a “murderer” (Spiegelman, 1986: 159). There is striking irony in labelling the main subject of a Holocaust survival narrative a “murderer”. The deliberate terminology accentuates the risks and responsibility in representing such complex topics. Despite Anja’s death being a suicide, Art holds his father accountable for actively ‘murdering’ her through silence. By burning her journal, he steals Art’s ability to come to terms with his mother’s story, and her right to tell her version of events is revoked. The fire serves as double irony, referencing the horrific deaths of those who burned during the Holocaust. The stories lost

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23 See *Maus* vol I, 159.
with fire include Anja’s, though through a very different course of events. If Art did not tell these stories, he would be committing the same act as Vladek; murdering Anja through silence.

**Final thoughts**

Spiegelman describes *Maus* as a “candle of memory for the dead” (Spiegelman and Alvar 3:20). Rather than claiming to own the voices of the dead, he looks to commemorate them. This task is not taken lightly. In an interview, he explains, “I murder my father by revealing secrets he doesn’t want me to tell” (Spiegelman and Alvar 17:13). As he labels his father a murderer for revoking Anja’s right to tell her story, he condemns himself for committing the same act. By revealing facts about the narrative Vladek had not consented to, the author raises the struggles of authorship and censorship in “collaborative” work. He points that “in telling there’s a problem of distortion and lying” (Spiegelman and Alvar 12:09). Syntax in this context also further attributes responsibility to the writer, who must avoid “distortion” and “lying”. He reflects on the relationship with his father as a “dysfunctional” one, yet speculates that while Vladek was not “eager” to share his story, he was a willing participant in the project (Spiegelman and Alvar 4:19). He describes Vladek as a “very good storyteller” in his own right; though how much of Vladek’s ‘good storytelling’ is evident in *Maus*, remains unclear (Spiegelman and Alvar 4:21). Adam Brown’s conflict of “speaking the unspeakable” and “representing the unrepresentative” resonates. Art’s continuous efforts to emphasize the acts of writing and mediating imply the adversity in overcoming these issues. The paradoxical challenges faced by works such as *Maus*, cannot be resolved. The ethical issue that a narrative such as *Maus* raises is the audience’s conditioned response to view a literary work as pleasurable to some extent. As a liminal figure, Spiegelman must come to terms with the unexpected reception of the text, as well as the foundations on which it is built. The success received by *Maus* further marks the complicated perpetual dialect between the necessity to speak and the inability to do so.

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