

## **Semiotic analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: A war comic with an open ending**

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*(Received 09/01/13; final version received 04/05/13)*

### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a semiotic analysis of some aspects of *Maus*, a war comic by Art Spiegelman, which is about Vladek Spiegelman's life (Art's father and survivor of the Jewish Holocaust) before, during and after Nazi Germany (1933-1945). This analysis explores the variation or continuity of the different signs which make up the language of comics, conceived as traces of varied recoverable discourses (Verón, 2004). For example, Spiegelman's characters are anthropomorphic creatures, with an animal head and a human body, whose hybrid identity gives rise to multiple readings, such as the need for a deconstruction of the victim's identity, the absence of any kind of sentimentalism and a new narrative about the classic confrontation "victim-murderer."

*Keywords:* Maus; war comic; semiotic analysis; the language of comics; recoverable discourses.

### **Resumen**

Desde una perspectiva semiótica, este artículo se propone analizar algunos aspectos de la historieta de guerra *Maus* de Art Spiegelman, que es la historia de Vladek Spiegelman (padre del autor y sobreviviente del Holocausto judío) antes, durante y después de la Alemania nazi (1933-1945). Se indaga sobre la variación y continuidad de los signos del lenguaje historietístico que, leídos como huellas de discursos subyacentes (Verón, 2004), dan origen a interpretaciones diversas. Tal es el caso de los seres antropomórficos, con cabeza de animal y cuerpo humano, cuya identidad híbrida suscita múltiples lecturas, como la necesidad de deconstruir la identidad de la víctima, la ausencia de sentimentalismo, y se ensaya una nueva narrativa sobre la clásica confrontación "víctima-victimario."

*Palabras clave:* Maus; historieta de guerra; análisis semiótico; lenguaje historietístico; discursos subyacentes.

THE GENERAL OBJECTIVE of this paper is to present a semiotic analysis of some comic strips from the historical war comic *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. Regarding the comic strips selected, they can be seen in the links provided in brackets for the sake of appreciating in detail the signs under analysis.

In this comic the characters are anthropomorphic creatures, with an animal head and a human body: the Jews are mice; the Germans are cats; the Americans are depicted as dogs, while the Poles are shown as pigs.

Spiegelman's work illustrates the life of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, who was a Holocaust survivor from Auschwitz. The reader is also allowed to discover the most intriguing and painful details of the author's life, his nightmare and trauma for having been the son of two survivors from Nazi Germany (1933-1945).

### Methodology

The semiotic analysis was applied to the two volumes of *Maus*. However, only some comic strips—thought as having the greatest illustrative potential of the different constructs proposed—have been discussed in the present paper.

In this paper a sign is conceived as a conventionalised element which makes up the language of comics (such as the modulated or contour line, the presence or absence of colours, shadows, shots, etc.) as well as any other symbol which was either created or incorporated by the author (for example, the masks that some of the characters wear).

Regarding the methodological framework, Eliseo Verón's definition of *sign* as well as his notion of *operations* guided the analysis in question. The signs were explored in the corpus focusing on their continuity or variation, which eventually triggered the construction of varied hypotheses on the kinds of relationships that could exist between them.

Each sign is read as a trace for many valid discourses. What is more, the process of recognising signs in a specific semiosis allows us to infer which possible meanings could have been assigned to them in their instances of generation:

Una superficie textual está compuesta por marcas. Esas marcas pueden interpretarse como las huellas de operaciones discursivas subyacentes que remiten a las condiciones de producción del discurso y cuya economía de conjunto definió el marco de las lecturas posibles, el marco de los efectos de sentido de ese discurso. De modo que las operaciones mismas no son visibles en la superficie textual: deben reconstruirse (o postularse) partiendo de las marcas de la superficie. (Verón, 2004a, p.51)

In *La semiosis social* Verón (2004b) argues that in any stretch of discourse, the instances of production and recognition of the signs in a semiosis give rise to two differentiated kinds of grammar, known as grammars of production (when constructing a text) and grammars of recognition (when reading a text). These grammars assign meanings to the signs that make up the semiosis:

La semiosis está a ambos lados de la distinción: tanto las condiciones productivas cuanto los objetos significantes que nos proponemos analizar contienen sentidos. (...) Entre las condiciones productivas de un discurso hay siempre otros discursos. Las relaciones de los discursos con sus condiciones de producción por una parte, y con sus condiciones de reconocimiento por la otra, deben poder representarse en forma sistemática; debemos tener en cuenta reglas de generación y reglas de lectura: en el primer caso hablamos de gramáticas de producción y en el segundo, de gramáticas de reconocimiento. (p. 129)

The notion of *operations*, defined by Verón (2004a, pp. 51-52) as a methodological concept, establishes the existing relationship between discourse and its social and historical conditions. As social conditions leave visible marks on the discursive surface, these operations may be reconstructed.

The basic model for an operation is made up of three components: the *operator* (or mark), the *operating element* (the sign that refers to the operator) and the relationship that is held between these two, for example, intertextuality, cataphoric and anaphoric reference, etc.

### **The Language and Characteristics of Comics**

Reading comics might allow the readers to be completely absorbed in their reading and their imagination can be carried away even against their will. The power of comics relies on the fact that they are entertaining, and their characters are those heroes and heroines we might easily feel identified with. Besides, the power of words and images creates a non-conventional atmosphere which helps us read in a pleasant and unique way.

When we read comics, the words and the images are inter-related and complement each other in such a way that we can even read texts through images. Words might appear as part of a narration or inside *balloons*, when the characters are speaking, and also inside *clouds*, when they are thinking about something. Steimberg (1977, p.24) claims that words are, in some cases, replaced by simplified mental and conventionalised images, such as a light bulb to indicate a brilliant idea or little stars which denote pain, among others. What is more, the non-conventionalised image allows the reader to make

different kinds of interpretations since no explicit message is being stated. Consequently, the power of the image is capable of connoting as many messages as readers are able to read.

Eco (2005) claims that the comic is an exponent of mass culture, which establishes its own semantics. In other words, comics have specific signs or conventions which constitute a language of their own. Speech balloons and boxes are used to indicate dialogue and to impart establishing information, while panels, layout, gutters and zip ribbons can help indicate the flow of the story. The use of text, ambiguity, symbolism, design, iconography, literary technique, and other stylistic elements of art help build a subtext of meanings or semantics.

Among the conventions and signs that make up the language of comics, we find kinds of shots, framing, and angles, the line, the presence or absence of color, among other signs which are also shared by other types of genres or languages, such as the language of television, the cinema, and graphic language (Barbieri, 1993).

Regarding types of shots, the extreme wide shot (EWS) is the one in which the view is so far from the subject that he is not visible. In the very wide shot (VWS) the subject, even if visible, is not the focus itself since the emphasis relies on placing him in a certain environment. The wide shot (WS) shows a subject who takes up the full frame, contrary to the mid shot (MS), which shows some part of him in more detail while still giving an impression of the whole subject. Another shot which allows us to highlight details is the close-up, in which a certain feature or part of the subject takes up the whole frame. The extreme close up is one that shows extreme details. The cut-in shows in detail some part of the subject, except his face.

Concerning angles (elements taken from the language of the cinema which facilitate the reading of comic squares), there are great varieties, which help build an interesting, peculiar perspective on the subject that is being framed. In addition, the angle selected can allow the reader or the audience (television, cinema) to make different hypotheses about what is being depicted. The common types of angles are: the normal angle, high camera angle, low camera angle, canted angle (on a slant), reverse angle, subjective camera angle (from the point of view of the subject; the way the subject sees things), and objective camera angle (the way an objective party or outsider is supposed to see things). Angles that look up or down at the object that is being framed (instead of being on the same level) make up the so-called tilt shots, which are more dramatic than straight-angle shots.

A downward tilt shot is used to observe action over a large area or to create a psychological impression of inferiority or weakness. Conversely, an upward tilt shot lends an impression of superiority, awe, or size.

Barbieri (1993, p.27) also provides useful information about the different kinds of

lines that might be found in any comic strip, which have different kinds of meaning. The line itself can represent an object, for example, a cord or the arm of a person in a childlike depiction of a human silhouette. It can also be the contour of an object, which is the case of a circle that represents a ball. The line can be either pure or modulated. The first type is used to draw and delimit objects. Consequently, it also allows us to distinguish one object from another. The modulated line adds an extra meaning compared to the pure one. For example, the thin line that delineates the pages of a book reminds us that they are made of paper. The thick line that composes the edge of a table tells us about its thickness and inclination. What is more, the modulated line can also let the reader visualize different textures, materials, shadows and illumination. Finally, the presence and absence of colour will also add several meanings which should be interpreted in each particular comic.

### **Comics as a profitable and valid genre in the transmission of history**

Even though comic strips are said to narrate and represent fiction, they can also be a valid genre in the transmission of real stories, which is the case with the so-called historical comics.

In his article *La trama histórica y el problema de la verdad en la representación histórica* (Historical emplotment and the problem of truth in historical representation), Hayden White (2003, p.193) claims that in traditional historical discourse there is a crucial difference between the interpretation of historical facts and what is being narrated about them. This difference is based on the existence of a real discourse (as opposed to a fictional one) and a true discourse (contrary to a false one). All interpretations are understood as comments about events, whereas any historical narration is presumed to be inherent to the facts themselves. In other words, historical narrations are claimed to be real as they are based on critical study and analysis of the historical data derived from the facts.

So, is it possible to transmit history through a genre that presupposes the existence of fiction? (which is the case of comic strips) and, if so, will this narration be as valid as any other historical narration?

In *Hecho y figuración en el discurso histórico* (Fact and figuration of historical discourse), Hayden White (2003, p. 57) states that the Jewish Holocaust (1941-1945), for example, can be narrated through any kind of genre, including comedy and parody. However, when considering moral and ethical criteria, the selection of certain genres to represent some historical facts might be found inappropriate by the audience, which is exactly what happened to *Maus* when this first appeared in 1986. There were unpleasant repercussions from Jewish Diasporists, such as Israelis and Poles (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 125). What is more, the philosopher reminds us that any representation of the Holocaust

is not the Holocaust itself.

The philosopher's thought might provide a tentative answer: It is indeed possible for the comic to represent historical facts as its representation will be as valid as any other which is derived from a *serious* genre.

### **Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a revolutionary war comic on the Jewish Holocaust**

Art Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1948. His parents were Polish Jews who had survived Auschwitz. Art was raised in the United States and went to the Academy of Arts University in San Francisco. Because of deep depression he was hospitalised and, shortly after he was released, his mother, Anya, committed suicide. His passion for comics allowed him to undergo some sort of catharsis and he created some comics which were eventually compiled in *Breakdowns* (1977). Nonetheless, he would strike an emotional balance in *Maus*, a masterpiece which reveals his own truth and perception of facts in a more objective way.

*Maus* is the story of Vladek Spiegelman, Art's father and survivor of Auschwitz. Pablo de Santis (1998, p. 46) defines it in a simple, clear way: '*Maus* is not just the narration of a survivor but the way in which the survivor's son understands his father's story and is able to live with it.' Spiegelman worked on his piece for more than ten years, and in 1992 it became the first comic book to win a Pulitzer Prize Special Award under the category non-fiction. He is considered a pioneer in representing the Jewish Holocaust in a narrative and visual genre such as the comic.

Art Spiegelman began working on *Maus* at the beginning of the '70s in New York. At that time Vladek was not keen on the idea of talking with his son about his past life and his wife's death since he believed that in order to survive it seems to be necessary to forget. As a consequence, this comic started with a fight between a father and son, a metaphorical war for the existence of some narration about the Holocaust. After harsh insistence, Vladek finally agrees on having those conversations which would eventually be transcribed into the form of words and images.

*Maus* was first published in an underground magazine called *Funny Animals* in 1972. Then it also appeared sporadically in some other magazines until the author founded *Raw* in 1980, where this historical comic became popular. Sometime later *Maus* was edited as a complete story in two volumes. The first, *Maus. A survivor's tale. My father bleeds history* (1986) and the second, *Maus, a survivor's tale. And here my troubles began* (1991). As mentioned earlier, the peculiarity of this comic is that the characters are anthropomorphic creatures, with a human body and the head of an animal. Each nationality or ethnicity is represented by an animal: Jews are depicted as mice; Germans as cats; Americans are represented by dogs. The Poles are pictured as pigs and the French, as frogs.

Spiegelman is not only the author but also the intratextual narrator and co-protagonist of *Maus*. In order to write and design the storyline, Art records long conversations with his father in Lego Queens and also in their summer house in the Catskills Mountains. These conversations, full of flashbacks, some memory slips and also interruptions are found intact in the two volumes; even though they are not about the Jewish Holocaust, they allow the reader to gain knowledge about the characters' feelings, thoughts and trauma.

These conversations help also to identify three main narrative frames which get intertwined in a natural way: the first one is the author's narrative frame (for example, when Art transcribes the tapes); the second, the frame story (when Art interviews his father and records their conversations) and the third is a story within the story, which depicts Vladek's life in the Nazi Germany.

### **Analysis Presentation**

#### **Implications of Spiegelman's animal allegory**

Although Spiegelman resorts to an animal allegory to design his characters, the plot is narrated in a realistic way. Not only do the characters speak like human beings but they also have human bodies, and walk, feel and think as if they were human. Huysen (2002, p. 131.) claims that in this way some mimetic approach to trauma is generated as the animal representation prevents sentimentalism or devastating compassion on the reader's part.

It is worth mentioning that, despite the fact that the characters are hybrid, they do not identify themselves with their animal identity. This is clearly seen when Vladek and his wife, Anja, are hiding in a basement and she, being a mouse, gets scared because of a rat (Spiegelman, 1986, p. 147). Neither do the Germans recognise themselves as cats. For example, the hybrid cats use dogs when they are searching Jews and these dogs do not attack them, as it would naturally happen if they were real cats (Ibid., p. 111).

Each representation illustrates the social role of each ethnicity under the Nazi domain. The choice of a mouse to stand for a Jew seems to be accurate for it depicts how the Jews were forced to behave and the way they were conceived by Hitler. Jews were forced to hide in basements, in sewers; they ate rotten food if they managed to eat anything; they were sent to ghettos, where they were made to live under unhealthy, inhumane conditions; they were used as if they had been rats by Josef Mengele, German SS officer and physician in the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz.

There are some strips in which the Jews are drawn with a tail, which highlights the animal identity. However, when tragic events are depicted, such as death, torture, or an instance of *selection* (Jews were made to line up; the selection consisted of choosing the healthiest ones to work in camps) the Jewish characters do not have a tail. On the

contrary, their naked bodies show human genitals, a sign which reminds us that the victims are human. The suffering is experienced by human beings, not by the supposed inferior race that Hitler tried to impose through his racial laws. As a consequence, it could be inferred that when tragedy is portrayed, the characters are drawn in such a way that the human condition is always highlighted. ([http://wilsonknut.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/maus\\_2\\_024.jpg](http://wilsonknut.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/maus_2_024.jpg)).

In one escape situation, a wide shot shows Anja and Vladek running away from the Gestapo (<http://sites.psu.edu/gongol30s/files/2012/09/maus1.jpeg>). Both characters are wearing a pig mask, since they want to pretend they are Polish, so as not to be caught and eventually sent to a concentration or work camp. Despite their effort to survive, their chances are very slim because Anja looks like a Jew due to her Semitic features; in Vladek's words: "I was a little safe. I had a coat and boots, so like a Gestapo wore when he was not in service, but Anja—her appearance—you could see more easy she was Jewish." (Ibid., p.136).

In this instance, Anja is drawn with a very long, J-shaped and white tail, which makes it noticeable in the darkness of the streets depicted. This sign may be read as the *punctum* of the square (Barthes, 2005, p. 59). Her tail seems to be a sign which gives away the Jewish condition of the protagonist in the Nazi era, a period when the Jews were conceived as an inferior race, and compared to rats or other filthy vermin. It may also be stated that Vladek's narration is clearly illustrated by the tail, which will immediately catch the reader's attention because of its colour and size. In addition, the same sign that connotes the character's Jewish condition is also the one that reminds us that Anja is a mouse in Spiegelman's world.

In conclusion, when the characters are behaving like mice, the animal identity is reinforced by the presence of some specific signs.

Regarding other social groups, the Poles are represented as pigs, probably because the pig is *non-kosher* (i.e. unclean) for Jews. In other words, the Torah forbids the consumption of this animal.

Female Poles are drawn as strong, vigorous pigs, always scared of the Gestapo and SS German officers. They do appear as secondary characters in the comic strips about Auschwitz-Birkenau (also known as Auschwitz II, the largest concentration and extermination camp in Poland), where the Polish women were hired as *kapos* (security guards).

Following the domination chain of cats and mice, the Americans are drawn as dogs. Americans were portrayed as the means of salvation for Jews. The comic strips in which they appear show them rescuing survivors from the concentration camps.

In only one instance, a French victim appears in a concentration camp. The animal chosen was a frog, probably because *frog* is a derogative term to refer to the French and



would remind the reader of all the years of anti-Semitism in France.

In the background of three scenes, some other animals such as a rabbit or a deer appear, being almost invisible to the eye when scanning the comic squares for the first time. Nevertheless, their presence somehow reminds us that Jews were not the only victims sent to concentration or work camps. Homosexuals, prostitutes, political prisoners and the disabled were also murdered. These apparent imperceptible signs increase the powerful effect of the documentary account on the Shoah (Hebrew term for Jewish Holocaust).

In *Metamaus* (2011), Spiegelman explains that “the cats and mice just came as a set, part of all the Tom and Jerry comics and cartoons that I grew up with” (p. 118). On the issue of the cat/mouse metaphor, the cartoonist adds “I liked working with a metaphor that didn’t work as an endorsement of Nazi ideology, or as an implicit plea for sympathy, like, Aw, lookit the cute defenseless little mouse.’ (...) but I didn’t put the mice necessarily at the total biological disadvantage that the metaphor otherwise implies.” (p. 118).

Regarding the choice of the pig to represent the Poles, Spiegelman asserts that his metaphor was somehow able to acknowledge his father’s opinion of Poles as a group:

(...) The Slavic races, including the Poles, were not meant to be exterminated like the Jews but rather worked to death. They were slated to be the master races’ work force of slaves. In my bestiary, pigs on a farm are used for meat. You raise them, you kill them, you eat them. If you have mice or rats on the farm, there’s only one thing to do which is kill them before they eat all your grain. So my metaphor was somehow acknowledging my father’s dubious opinion of Poles as a group. (Ibid., p. 121)

I’m just making a book that uses Hitler’s pejorative attitudes against themselves. (...) And considering the bad relations between Poles and Jews for the last few hundred years in Poland, it seemed right to use a non-Kosher animal. (Ibid., p. 125)

In his latest book, Art Spiegelman does not provide arguments about other species selected for his animal metaphor. However, even if it may be thought-provoking to know the author’s explanations, the reader is not obliged to accept them. Following Verón’s methodological framework, the configuration of signs in their instances of production presupposes the designation of certain meanings which, by no means, implies that the same meanings should be recovered in the instances of recognition.

Why choose anthropomorphic creatures to represent the protagonists? By choosing

animals, there is a denial of the human condition; all the social groups were forced, due to historical variables, to behave as if they were animals, giving place to an apparently never-ending form of domination. Humanity was forbidden, there was no room for it in the Third Reich. However, as illustrated in the analysis, the author is clever enough to highlight either the human condition or the animal identity of the hybrid creatures depending on what kind of situation is being portrayed, by including some specific signs in his strips.

This denial of the human condition is highly intertwined with the need to dehumanize the victims and to deprive them of their identity, to the extent that in Auschwitz the victims were tattooed with an identification number on their left forearm. Jews were killed as if they had been vermin, such as rats, fleas or roaches. Extermination was carried out by means of Zyklon B<sup>1</sup>, a pesticide used in all extermination camps<sup>2</sup>, originally tested on Russian prisoners of war.

### **Meanings of *the mask***

In some specific cases, as in the one previously described, the characters cover their face with a mask. This mask is hiding their real Jewish identity, which would only make them die.

In *Mein Kampf*, a book presumably written by Adolf Hitler in 1924, when he was imprisoned in Landsberg, the Führer develops in detail the notion of mask; he argues that Jews live in disguise, pretending to be what, in fact, they are not. He claims that once their mask falls down what is actually seen is simply a Jew. Consequently, Germans need to be aware of their ability to manipulate reality and to deceive others.

A Jew is and remains a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider areas as some favourable area attracts him. The effect produced by his presence is also like that of the vampire; for wherever he establishes himself, the people who grant him hospitality are bound to be bled to death sooner or later. Thus the Jew has at all times lived in States that have belonged to other races and within the organization of those States he had formed a State of his own, which is, however, hidden behind the mask of a 'religious community', as long as external circumstances do not make it advisable for this community to declare its true nature. As soon as the Jew feels himself sufficiently established in his position to be able to hold it without a disguise, he lifts the mask and suddenly appears in the character which so many did not formerly believe or wish to see: namely that of the Jew. (Hitler, 1939, p.238)

The life which the Jew lives as a parasite thriving on the substance of other nations and States has resulted in developing that specific character which Schopenhauer once described when he spoke of the Jew as ‘The Great Master of Lies’. The kind of existence which he leads forces the Jew to the systematic use of falsehood, just as naturally as the inhabitants of northern climates are forced to wear warm clothes. (Ibid. p. 238)

This metaphorical use of the mask is also seen in Spiegelman’s work, a sign which might connote different kinds of meanings.

In the second volume of *Maus*, Art can be seen lying on his desk (Spiegelman, 1991, p.41). (<http://theperiodicfable.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/art-spiegelman-maus1.jpg>). This image shows the first narrative frame, the author’s time, the nineties. He feels defeated despite the fact that *Maus* has become a real success worldwide and has been translated into more than fifteen foreign languages. In this square, Art has a human face covered by a mouse mask. This mask is a link to Auschwitz, to the concentration camp where his father has survived. He has never been there; however, he is tied to the past. This sign, the mask, takes the reader to another narrative frame, the story within the story, which takes place during the Nazi Germany.

This use of the mask may show not only some conflict regarding the construction of Art’s own identity, but also a link to a past from which it seems to be impossible to recover and survive.

This hypothesis about this inevitable link to the past is supported by the presence of some other signs in the square, such as the view of the concentration camp from the window, the flies (only found in seventeen squares and always surrounding rotten corpses) and the pile of corpses on the floor.

Art Spiegelman’s trauma has made him take up therapy sessions. His therapist, Pavel, is also a Holocaust survivor who is always depicted with a human face and a mouse mask. There is no reason to wear such a mask. Hitler lost his war; he has already been rescued. Even if for different reasons, both the analyst and patient seem to be unable to solve the same key conflict: the fact of being still linked to Auschwitz, for having either been deported to Auschwitz or having been a listener to this traumatic event.

The listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his functions as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge, so that its henceforth impossible witnessing can indeed take place. (Laub, 1992, p.222)

### **The depiction of the theory of the Aryan race in Spiegelman's images**

In the Nazi period, Hitler wanted to impose the theory of the Aryan race, which would allow for an accurate distinction of pure or Aryan Germans, whose genealogy trees did not have any Jewish ancestors.

In his article *The Nazi ideology and its roots*, Frankel (2000, p. 29) develops Hitler's theory of the Aryan blood. Having some Jewish origin implied being impure, having contaminated blood. A real German was not supposed to have Jewish blood.

Germans were expected to take care of their health and physical appearance, since their main objective was to marry only Aryan people to procreate in order to help build an Aryan nation.

According to Peter Adam (1992, p.11), the art of the third Reich portrayed the values of blood and soil (in German, *Blut und Boden*), and ideology which focuses on ethnicity and homeland, establishing a relationship between the individual's Aryan ancestry and their nation, cultivating the values of rural life.

Paintings and sculptures were said to be realistic and the images of men and women were heavily stereotyped. The commonest image was that of the nude men, which highlighted the ideal stereotype of the Aryan race (beauty, health and aesthetics). Highly recognised artists were Adolf Siegler (painter), Josef Thorak and Arno Breker (sculptors).

Modern music was disregarded; on the contrary, classical German music was the only choice, such as Richard Wagner and Hans Pfitzner's.

Spiegelman's cats are well-built, with an angular face, always wearing their military uniform, which would guarantee their pure ancestry since a German officer's roots were thoroughly analysed before serving as German officers.

The cover of Chapter 3 *Prisoners of War* (Spiegelman, 1986, p. 41) ([http://www.fultonschools.org/teacher/cooney/Maus\\_files/POW.JPG](http://www.fultonschools.org/teacher/cooney/Maus_files/POW.JPG)) shows two German officers. Both cats could be clearly confused with human characters, especially the one which does not have whiskers. What is more, this human cat is the one who wears the swastika on his arm, a symbol which would remind Nazis "to be good". Besides, it may be inferred that this cat depicts the purest Aryan stereotype since his eyes are highlighted in white, probably representing light eyes. This is not the case in other depictions of cats.

In *Maus*, the crucial role of nationality in the Nazi Germany is also treated. In the comic only one German cat is not depicted as Aryan (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 50), his facial complexion highlights his presumably impure blood. This cat's face truly shows an animal in despair for he is a prisoner in a concentration camp despite having been born in Germany. During their conversation, Art asks his father if the prisoner in question was really a German. Vladek simply explains that there were also German prisoners and that this prisoner for the Germans was Jewish:

Art: “Was he REALLY a German?”

Vladek: “Who knows...it WAS German prisoners also...but for the Germans this guy was Jewish (*sic*)” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maus\\_volume\\_2\\_page\\_50\\_panels\\_3-4.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maus_volume_2_page_50_panels_3-4.png)).

In this exchange, the term *German* becomes controversial. In the Nazi era being a German implied being Aryan, not having any suspected Jewish roots. Jews would never be considered Germans in spite of having been born in Germany and despite the fact they have never been deprived of their German citizenship. They would even keep their citizenship when the so-called Nuremberg laws came into force in 1938.

In Art’s exchange the word *really* emphasizes the existence of different types of Germans: the Aryans on the one hand, and the Germans who would have some Jewish ancestors and, as a consequence, be regarded as Jews.

In Spiegelman’s world there are no female cats. Most of the storyline refers back to Auschwitz and most of the events illustrated took place in concentration camps. This absence is coherent with the historical setting since Aryan women would never approach any concentration camp; their role was to take care of their families and to give birth to Aryan children. The women who were in concentration or work camps were female guards, for example, Irma Grese and María Mandel. These two women, famous because of their cruelty and hatred, did not fit into the social stereotypes imposed in Nazi Germany, to the extent they were conceived as non-women. Consequently, they could work in the camps.

One should not assume, as is often done, that Nazi sexism concerned only superior women and Nazi racism concerned only inferior women. Both Nazi racism and sexism concerned all women, the inferior as well as the superior. The “birth achievement” demanded of acceptable women was calculated carefully according to the numbers of those who were not to give birth. And the strongest pressure on such acceptable women to procreate, to create an orderly household for husband and children, and to accept dependency on the breadwinner perhaps came not so much from the continuous positive propaganda about “valuable motherhood,” but precisely from its opposite: the negative propaganda and policy that barred unwelcome, poor, and deviant women from procreation and marriage and labeled either disorderly women or single women with too many children inferior. Thus, racism could be used, and was used, to impose sexism in the form of increased unwaged housework on superior women (Bock, 1993, p. 163).

On the other hand, women who became or were to become targets of negative race hygiene tended also to be those who did not accept, could not accept, or were not supposed to accept the Nazi view of female housework, whose main features can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. Sexism, which imposed economic dependency on superior

married women, could be used, and was used, to implement racism by excluding many women from the relative benefits granted to desirable mothers and children and forcing them to accept the lowest jobs in the labor-market hierarchy in order to survive. (...) Racist-sexist discourses of many kinds have portrayed socially, sexually, or ethnically alien women as non-women, and thus as threatening to the norms for all other women (Ibid., p.164).

### Conclusion

Art Spiegelman has represented in an original and valid way the Jewish Holocaust (1941-1945), contributing with a legitimate piece to the so-called Jewish Holocaust literature.

This comic, easily recognised by its allegorical component, might be said to expose the atrocities committed by the Nazis and the deep suffering of their victims by resorting to an animal allegory, which describes how the social groups were forced to behave, and the consequences of their behaviour. However, it is more than that. To start with, the choice of animals denies the apparent impossibility of portraying the Jewish Holocaust since Spiegelman's creatures are not human and find no referent in the world of reality, since no creature with an animal head belongs to this world.

We encounter a special use of comics, a genre which originally used to presuppose the existence of fiction, and can be used to narrate real stories through words and visual elements triggering an innumerable number of readings, emotions and thoughts. Consequently, *Maus* validates this special use of comics by transmitting an exemplary memory (Todorov, 1995) which contributes to the collective memory of the Jewish people in the first place and also to humanity.

Spiegelman manages to transmit his father's memory by including specific signs which might offer multiple interpretations and by making them prevail when necessary, combining elements whose illustrative power seems to be natural, obvious, and intrinsic to the masterpiece itself. Furthermore, the author resorts to the inclusion of original documents to validate the realistic environment pictured in every scene, such as family photographs, and his own comic *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, which was created in 1972 as some kind of autobiography, where Spiegelman is seen wearing the stripped uniform of the concentration camp and eventually taken to a mental hospital. Considering what has been mentioned, *Maus* IS a document in itself.

As an exemplary memory transmitter, this comic narrates Vladek's story and allows readers to reflect on the Jewish Holocaust. Its mimetic approach as well as its allegorical component arouse some possible unprejudiced understanding of the Shoah and the Nazi period.

Lack of resentment will eventually result in understanding (not necessarily

acceptance), a requirement to learn from what once happened so as to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future, and to live in the present without being anchored in the past. Art Spiegelman's mouse mask does not allow him to transcend. He cannot move; he cannot survive his trauma. The same seems to be true for Art's therapist, Pavel.

Spiegelman's work is an invitation to some critical thinking, which breaks the typical confrontation *victim-murderer*. All the protagonists were victims of one of the cruelest historical periods in the history of humanity. The Jewish Holocaust has not only affected the Jewish community as a whole but also the Germans who did not share the views of the perpetrators of such atrocity.

The choice of animals which have been drawn with a few strokes, and the absence of morbid drawings might prevent the reader from experiencing anger, hatred, or compassion. Consequently, a more objective reading may arise. Spiegelman's images seem to have a soothing effect or impact on the reader's emotions when compared to authentic photographs of survivors, for example.

*Maus* is a war comic. A war comic is a special genre which emerged and gained popularity after World War II (1939-1945). Which war does Spiegelman's comic depict? World War II? The Nazis against the Jews? The ceaseless conflict between Art Spiegelman and his father for having been unable to understand each other? Vladek's war with himself for not wanting to talk about the Holocaust? Art's inner war for being tied to the atrocities of the past? In *Maus* there are as many wars as anecdotes being retold.

Spiegelman's last square shows the marble slab of his parents. This last square is not framed, the slab imposes itself and the lack of frame demands an open ending. Vladek and Anja are dead but their death does not stop their memory, which will live on in their descendants and also in this war comic with an open ending.

## Notes

1. For more information on Zyklon B, resort to [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206400.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206400.pdf).
2. For more information on concentration and extermination camps, read [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/05/death\\_camps.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/05/death_camps.asp).

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