

## **STEPHANIE CERASO**

### **Survivors' Tales: Cultural Trauma, Postmemory, and the Role of the Reader in Art Spiegelman's Visual Narratives**

Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence.<sup>1</sup>

Many traditional modes of historiography represent the past as though it were completely severed from the present. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "there are innumerable tasks of historical scholarship that have no relation to our own present and to the depths of its historical consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Historical narratives often create a false sense of closure by appearing to be unified, coherent stories based solely on factual evidence. These narratives isolate us from the past by masking history's contemporary relevance. But, Gadamer continues, "there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future. History is only present to us in light of our futurity."<sup>3</sup> In terms of continuity, or creating a continuous historical narrative, traditional historical accounts are problematic. Although the transmission of history is dependent on the reader's ability to make connections with the past, the reader is alienated from these seemingly objective historical narratives. Furthermore, because these accounts ignore the relationship

between the past and the present, thereby making history appear irrelevant, they produce a de-historicised notion of the future. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers*, however, present historians with an innovative alternative model of historical representation in which the ways we come to know and understand our personal and cultural histories are made explicit.<sup>4</sup>

In *Maus*, Spiegelman tells the story of Vladek, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, and his son Art, a cartoonist who longs to understand his father. Art's and Vladek's stories spiral around each other, becoming tightly intertwined as the narrative progresses. Similarly, in *In The Shadow of No Towers*, an account of Spiegelman's perpetual anxiety after 9/11, a major historical event is intertwined with Art's personal connection to the event. As I will demonstrate, Spiegelman also implicates the reader into both of these narratives. His constant weaving of the personal (the incorporation of his own story and the reader's memories/experiences) and the historical produces a new narrative, one in which a combination of "then" and "now" is brought into existence for future readers. By involving the reader in these historical accounts, Spiegelman is implanting in them a history that will be transmitted to the future. Thus, Spiegelman gives history a sense of continuity by (re)historicising "our futurity."<sup>5</sup>

Although incorporating the reader into the narrative plays a major part in giving history a contemporary resonance, it is also a controversial aspect of Spiegelman's work. Since Spiegelman is dealing with cultural trauma, the reader is implicated not just in the narrative, but in the horror being represented. The psychic strain produced by this trauma is inflicted on the reader. His texts, then, raise some significant ethical questions and dilemmas that need to be taken into consideration. This essay will explore the disease-like effect of postmemory

(Marianne Hirsch's term for the notion of being haunted by memories of trauma that one has experienced only indirectly<sup>6</sup>) on Spiegelman and his work, as well as the ethical questions that arise in *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers*. More specifically, I will argue that the proliferation of trauma in the reader, ethical or not, plays a crucial role in the transmission of cultural trauma/history. Because this transmission cannot occur without the reader's active participation in the text, it is also necessary to look at how the reader's individual experiences affect the ways in which history is passed on and distorted from generation to generation. Examining Spiegelman's engaging mode of historical representation will illustrate that the past's role in shaping the present, particularly how we have come to know about the past, must be exposed and understood in order for transformation to occur in the future.

## I Silence Speaks

Samuel Beckett once said: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness".... On the other hand, he SAID it.<sup>7</sup>

In *At Memory's Edge*, James Young comments on Spiegelman's attempt to capture those Holocaust stories that remain untold. Young writes,

Spiegelman seems also to be asking how we write the stories of the dead without filling in their absence. In a limited way, the commixture of image and narrative allows the artist to do just this, to make visible crucial parts of memory-work usually lost to narrative alone, such as the silences and spaces between words.<sup>8</sup>

Young continues this discussion of representing the unrepresentable in an interview with Spiegelman. When asked about his substitution of animals for humans, Spiegelman replies, "I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them. I want to show the masking of these events *in* their representation."<sup>9</sup> The anthropomorphised characters symbolise

that which cannot be revealed: distorted or lost memories, the experiences of the deceased, and the horrific reality of the Holocaust itself, which is impossible to recapture. Moreover, the animals draw attention to themselves, constantly reminding readers not to conflate the actual Holocaust with the constructed memory of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

The unshowable and ineffable elements that Young examines take on a visible form in *Maus*. The gutters (the spaces between panels) tacitly enrich Spiegelman's story in a way that words or images alone could not; gutters are unique to the comic medium. The silences and voids surrounding personal and historic events are located within these gutters. They are spaces from which we can extract just as much, if not more, meaning as we can from images or words. Clearly, the transmission of meaning does not simply stop when language stops. As Michel Foucault writes,

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name... —is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.<sup>11</sup>

Like Foucault, Spiegelman does not subscribe to a binary division that separates the spoken from the unspoken/unspeakable. Rather, he has found a visible way not to say things. Spiegelman uses the inclusion and embodiment of silence, the silence surrounding both the Holocaust and his own life story, as a device to incorporate the reader into his text.

Throughout *Maus*, we are constantly made aware of what is lacking in Spiegelman's narrative. For instance, in a conversation with his therapist, Art says, "the victims who died can

never tell THEIR side of the story, so maybe it's better not to have any more stories."<sup>12</sup> In addition to the innumerable lost stories, Spiegelman's deceased relatives (his mother Anja and brother Richieu), are crucial voices that are also absent from his narrative. I would suggest, however, that the very act of acknowledging these voids gives them a ubiquitous presence. They are at once everywhere and nowhere. As Vladek exclaims in the second volume, "Anja? What is to tell? Everywhere I look I'm seeing Anja.... From my *good* eye, from my glass eye, if they're open or they're closed, always I'm thinking on Anja."<sup>13</sup> Although they are physically missing, the presence of the dead and the silence of things left unsaid saturate every page.

The narrative action, both Vladek's story and Art's reconstruction of this story, happens within the borders of the panels. But as Spiegelman himself states, "It's what takes place between the panels that activates the medium."<sup>14</sup> Art is compelled to record his father's story in an attempt to make sense of his own life, to fill in the silences and voids that disturb him. The gutters, then, embody what Art and the reader do not and cannot know about Art's personal history and the history of the Holocaust. It is the desire to recover what has been silenced, to restore lost or unknown knowledge, that propels the narrative forward. Michael Levine notes, "Staining these silences and those of his father's story with the words of his text, Spiegelman screens them in such a way as to allow them all the more powerfully and hauntingly to bleed through."<sup>15</sup> This strategic "staining" is apparent from the very first pages of Spiegelman's text. In the poignant opening scene of *Maus*, Spiegelman gives the reader a glimpse of what it was like to grow up with a Holocaust survivor: even the most trivial events of Art's childhood are coloured by his father's memories of the Holocaust. In this scene, a sobbing young Art is abandoned by his friends, who prove to be more skilful on roller skates. When he explains what

happened to his father, Vladek is disgusted that his son would even refer to these kids as “friends.” He bursts out, “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... *then* you could see what it is, friends!...”<sup>16</sup> The spatial arrangement of the very last panel in the sequence, the one that leads us into the “real” story, is especially significant. The panel is double the size of the others on the page and it provides the reader with a zoomed-out view. We see Art and Vladek standing in their empty front yard, surrounded by empty space. The remarkably large font and capacious text bubble containing Vladek’s words, which are also unique to this panel, call our attention to what is missing. The white space around the words, the starkness of the picture, and the physical space between Art and Vladek all make us more aware of what is not there, of what is not being said. And, while the ellipsis after “friends!” alerts us that words have been omitted or cut off, it also reveals that there are answers and stories within the pregnant silence of the panel. Thus, the silence and space surrounding Vladek’s words incite the reader to turn the page in hopes of filling in the gaps. What is not being said is driving the narrative forward.

In addition, the silences between the panels also help draw the reader into the story. However, it is important to recognise that the gutters themselves cannot activate the medium or produce meaning without the work of the reader. The gutters provide space for readers to make meaning of the story *and* to incorporate their own memories and experiences into the text. The meaning that pervades this space, the meaning which the reader must bring to the narrative, is precisely what brings the story into being. Furthermore, the silences within and surrounding the panels do not simply invite the reader into the text. Rather, Spiegelman demands the reader to jump into the silences and fill them up with meaning. The narrative will make no sense unless

the reader can navigate through the silences and follow the logic from panel to panel.

Disturbingly, in order to make sense of *Maus*, the reader must first understand and adopt Nazi logic. For example, Spiegelman never explicitly defines the animal symbolism for the reader (the Jews are represented as mice, the Nazis as cats).<sup>17</sup> The meaning of the symbolism is another one of the text's silences and it is up to the reader to give that silence meaning. The reader must accept that the Jews are represented as mice because they were viewed as prey, vermin, pests that must be exterminated. The reader's tacit agreement that this metaphor holds, that it works, is what implicates her into the narrative. Rather than feeling alienated from the horror, then, the reader is actually complicit with the rationale that led to the possibility of the "final solution." Spiegelman implicates us in the horror by positioning us within the minds of those who were responsible for it.

Since the majority of readers most probably think of themselves as compassionate human beings, the adoption of Nazi logic puts us in a seriously distressing position. But why would Spiegelman intentionally invoke a moral dilemma in his readers? One reason, I think, is that by positioning the reader within the text, Spiegelman is attempting to de-familiarise the Holocaust narratives that we have become so accustomed to: unified narratives that present trauma in a factual, detached way. In these narratives, the reader is expected simply to accept the facts as something that happened in the past, something that is over and done with. Spiegelman's narratives, on the other hand, jar the reader out of this passive role by making her participate in the trauma. In this way, Spiegelman's mode of storytelling simultaneously de-familiarises traditional historical accounts of the Holocaust and revives history by making it happen "now" for the reader to experience personally.

Although Spiegelman's method of historical representation is unusual, particularly due to his choice of medium, it is not unprecedented. Techniques like de-familiarisation and the narrative intertwining of past and present are common tropes in historical fiction, biography, autobiography, and literary non-fiction. What sets Spiegelman apart, however, is that his texts show us how we have come to know what happened in the past. His genre-busting narratives uncover the *process* of how we interpret and understand history. In this sense, his project is very much a hermeneutical one. The "meta" or self-reflexive aspect of Spiegelman's work allows the reader to investigate and interrogate how history is transmitted (from father to son, from son to readers, etc.). Spiegelman's archaeological approach to storytelling makes visible an epistemology of postmemory.

## II Compulsory Remembering

I'm hunched over the drawing table in my Lower Manhattan studio, with my fingers tightly crossed.... It's hard to hold a pen this way... but I'd feel like such a jerk if a new disaster strikes while I'm still chipping away at the last one...<sup>18</sup>

Spiegelman is once again compelled to document the memory of trauma in his post-9/11 work *In The Shadow of No Towers*. However, this survivor's tale is told from the perspective of direct, rather than mediated, experience. The narrative is a reflection of Spiegelman's interminable state of fear and anxiety after the 9/11 attacks. Interestingly, the silences and voids that haunted him in *Maus* take on a new form in this book. The word "Shadow" in the title, for instance, draws our attention to the ghostly presence of the World Trade Center towers, and also to the meaning that has been retroactively assigned to these structures. Whereas before 9/11 no one gave much thought to the towers, which blended into the cultural wallpaper of the NYC skyline, after 9/11



these buildings suddenly took on a monumental significance. They now stand for a time when America was still a seemingly impenetrable force. We have projected this meaning onto the towers in order to create a sense of the past that suits our current anxieties. In other words, we want to believe that there was a time we were once safe so we can eventually go back to that time; thus, we have become nostalgic for a time that really never existed. Spiegelman's use of the word "Shadow" is particularly apt because it shares connotations with the current notion of "terror," which is essentially what destroyed the towers in the first place. Like a shadow, "terror" lurks all around us (at least, according to the government and media). It is at once everywhere and nowhere. Many Americans, Spiegelman included, are still haunted by the non-existent shadow of the WTC towers. It has become yet another spectre, like Anja and Richieu, that Spiegelman cannot seem to shake from his psyche. In fact, the shape of the book and many of the panels resemble towers. Spiegelman represents himself as literally imprisoned by the shadow of an event that has clearly traumatised him.

As in *Maus*, the silences and shadows in *In The Shadow of No Towers* demand that the reader make meaning. However, what is different about Spiegelman's more recent text is that the majority of readers have actually experienced 9/11 either directly or indirectly. Therefore, most readers can (and are required to) fill in the gutters with their own lived memories. Spiegelman's decisions to leave varying amounts of white space (or no white space) control how much filling-in the reader is expected to produce on any given page. The silences demand readers to make sense *and* to remember. But what is the point of this remembering? Moreover, what is the purpose of permanently recording this remembering, particularly when trauma or disaster is involved?

Curiously, Spiegelman's work both criticises and participates in our society's compulsion to remember. For example, in a panel which illustrates Art and his wife, Françoise, watching the towers burn from a distance, Françoise shrieks, "Wow! I oughta run home and get our camera." Art replies, "Nah! There'll be lotsa photographers!"<sup>19</sup> Françoise's gut reaction (a reaction that has become common among witnesses of recent catastrophic events) is not to run away from the horror, but to document it. Art understands her instinct and sways her to keep walking only because he is sure that the event will be sufficiently recorded by others, and he is right. The next panel reads, "In mere moments their quiet Soho street was FILLED with paparazzi. And camera crews remained on their corner, at the perimeter of Ground Zero, for days after.... He saw the falling bodies on tv much later... but what he *actually* saw got seared into his skull forever."<sup>20</sup> In retrospect, Spiegelman claims that his lived memories are much more damaging than the memories of the media images he absorbed. This comment explains why he illustrates many of his lived memories from that day, most notably his recollection of trying to find his daughter at her school, in the shape of snapshots.<sup>21</sup> Once these memories are permanently "captured" in a formal medium, he seems to think they will be less intrusive. His impulse to "capture" traumatic memories is clearly an attempt to suppress them; he uses formal mediation as a means of processing memories so they can be "properly" contained. Although Spiegelman criticises the media for their obsession with memorialising events even while they are still happening, these panels demonstrate that he fully admits to being a participant in this compulsion. His creating of *In The Shadow of No Towers* is another contribution to our obsessive memorialising, and indeed, monumentalising. However, transforming these memories of trauma into a cultural artifact also enables distressful remembering by exposing readers to excess trauma.

I would like to suggest that the failure to contain trauma, the inability to bear the psychic strain trauma produces, unconsciously motivates trauma victims to inflict postmemory on succeeding generations. As Marianne Hirsch defines it, “postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as narratives and images with which they grew up.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the children of survivors incorporate into themselves a past that is not their own. They have been repetitively subjected to tales and images of events they never witnessed because their parents were unable to repress their own traumatic memories; showing and telling about their experiences with the Holocaust served as a release of psychic strain. Because of this repetitive exposure, the survivors’ indelible stories take on the weight of real, deeply traumatic memories in the minds of their children.

This is not to say that all children of Holocaust survivors are damaged by postmemory. Rather, whether or not one experiences postmemory depends on the amount and intensity of exposure one has/had to their parents’ trauma. Those children who do suffer from postmemory are infected with the traumatic memories of their parents, and eventually, these haunting postmemories become too much for their new “host,” if you will. The trauma will spill out of them just as it spilled out of their parents. Thus, like a disease, the psychic strain Spiegelman experiences begins to reproduce itself all over his work. Consequently, these repetitive, invasive memories/images in *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers* have the potential to infect the reader as well.<sup>23</sup> In trying to purge himself of trauma through his commix,<sup>24</sup> then, Spiegelman is actually transmitting trauma to a new generation.

### III The Contagious Excess of Trauma

“Those crumbling towers burned their way into every brain...”<sup>25</sup>

Spiegelman’s attempts to work through or release his traumatic memories and/or postmemories are ultimately futile. In an interview he states, “for the parts of my story—of my father’s story—that are just on tape or on transcripts, I have an overall idea and eventually I can fish it out of my head. But the parts that are in the book are now in neat little boxes. I know what happened by having assimilated it that fully. And that’s part of my reason for this project, in fact.”<sup>26</sup>

Spiegelman tries to contain the memories of trauma within the panels of his narrative (as I have pointed out above). By locking them in with borders, they will ostensibly be unable to haunt him. In this respect, the medium Spiegelman has chosen to represent trauma is quite appropriate. As Scott McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, “Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality... in a very real sense, comics is closure [sic].”<sup>27</sup> In other words, a sense of completion must be established from panel to panel; the fragments must connect to create a whole in order for understanding to happen. But again, this is something that cannot be accomplished without the reader. It seems to me, then, that narrative closure is an inherently *missing* element in the structure of comics. It is the reader that must fill in the gaps and voids with meaning. Yet, as I have argued, for narrative closure (understanding) to occur, the reader must be implicated in the trauma. Thus, narrative closure does not necessarily result in emotional/psychological closure for the reader or the author. Although Spiegelman attempts to find (emotional/psychological) closure within the confines of comics, it is impossible to lock up or bury the past forever. As Michael Levine argues, “it is precisely in the way that

*Maus* works to open its neat little boxes—its safe little crypts—that it makes room for the very excesses of testimony, for that which it cannot contain in words or images, for that which it cannot draft or draw together in a single bound volume.”<sup>28</sup> These excesses (what Levine refers to as the “unbound energies of the text”) penetrate borders, enabling trauma to escape the boundaries of the panels and even the boundaries of the page.<sup>29</sup>

Spiegelman’s work illustrates the excesses of trauma not only in its visible silences, but also in the form of repetitive images. In *Memory and Representation*, Dena Eber and Arthur Neal conclude that “unwanted memories of trauma continue to surface until some degree of closure is achieved. The more intense traumatic memories tend to be nonverbal, static, and repetitious. They more nearly appear as a series of still snapshots or like a silent movie, rather than a coherent narrative.”<sup>30</sup> In this sense, comics, as opposed to written narratives, are an ideal medium for representing memories of trauma. The “nonverbal, static, and repetitious” images and the filmic or still-photograph effect they are able to convey make Spiegelman’s choice of medium optimal for depicting fragmented and intrusive memories. However, no matter how much he exercises these images and memories through narrative closure, reaching emotional/psychological closure seems impossible. For example, there is evidence of the resurfacing of unwanted postmemories in *In The Shadow of No Towers*. Repetitive images of Art wearing his mouse mask appear throughout the text. This recurring image demonstrates that a new traumatic event triggers the postmemories of previous trauma. Spiegelman writes, “I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like.... The closest he got was telling me it was ‘indescribable’.... That’s exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after September 11<sup>th</sup>!”<sup>31</sup> The history and memories of the Holocaust literally bleed off the pages of *Maus* and seep

into a new discourse of trauma.<sup>32</sup> Every new traumatic encounter is shaped (or colonised) by the trauma that preceded it.

Yet, with fresh trauma, fresh invasive images and memories emerge. After 9/11, for instance, the image of one of the tower's burning skeletons was seared into Spiegelman's mind. Not surprisingly, this burning framework appears on every single page of his book. Most people who experienced 9/11, directly or through the media's relentless sensationalising of the event, have particular images that they will permanently associate with that day. Once these images are branded into our psyches they have the ability repetitively to invade our thoughts. Spiegelman's reproduction of the glowing towers reflects this intrusion. The images' repetition has a paradoxical effect on the reader: the tower becomes both familiar and estranging. As Hirsch explains, "somehow, in these repetitions, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance *and* an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect *and* a producing of it."<sup>33</sup> The repetition of images associated with trauma evokes the effect of trauma in those who have experienced it either first hand or through a medium.

Significantly, many of Spiegelman's drawings in both *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers* are recreations of actual Holocaust photographs<sup>34</sup> and images from 9/11. Most of these pictures are well-known (the infamous gate to Auschwitz,<sup>35</sup> for example, or the 9/11 footage of people jumping from tower windows).<sup>36</sup> The original images have become a familiar part of our cultural memory bank and have therefore lost their initial shock value.<sup>37</sup> As Susan Sontag observes, "Images anesthetize... at the time of the first photographs of the Nazi camps, there was nothing banal about these images. After thirty years, a saturation point may have been reached."<sup>38</sup> In other words, we have become desensitised over time, immune to graphic historical images

which have been overused in scholarly works and the media. But in recreating these images, Spiegelman is able to translate the jarring effect of the original trauma to his readers. He breathes life and feeling back into these pictures by re-contextualising them. However, Spiegelman's purpose for re-contextualising may have more to do with personal reasons than with shocking his readers. Hirsch suggests,

In repeatedly exposing themselves to the same pictures, postmemorial viewers can produce in themselves the effects of traumatic repetition that plague the victims of trauma. Even as the images repeat the trauma of looking, they disable, in themselves, any restorative attempts. *It is only when they are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts, that they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through.* (emphasis added)<sup>39</sup>

Although “a postmemorial working through” may be Spiegelman's ultimate aim in re-contextualising these images, the repetition in his work certainly does not indicate that he will come to an eventual understanding or acceptance of the past. For instance, after the publication of *Maus*, Spiegelman had two different museum exhibitions in New York City, both entitled “The Road to *Maus*.”<sup>40</sup> These exhibitions featured earlier drafts of his panels and included recordings of the original interviews with Vladek. As Young notes, “Spiegelman hoped to bring his true object of representation into view: the process by which he arrived at a narrative, by which he made meaning in and *worked through* a history that has been both public and personal” (emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> Young also seems to be of the opinion that Spiegelman has “worked through” his trauma by re-contextualising these images and stories once again. However, the fact that Spiegelman needs to keep finding new ways to recreate his traumatic memories reveals that his “working through” is nowhere near complete. For instance, a fully interactive CD-ROM version of *Maus* was produced in 1994, two years after Spiegelman's initial museum exhibitions. And, as I have illustrated, the Holocaust images that haunt him (even after he has recreated them) have

been incorporated into yet another traumatic representation in *In The Shadow of No Towers*. In addition, Spiegelman's most recent work-in-progress—"Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?\*"—deals directly with his postmemorial suffering. Spiegelman has been publishing instalments of this project in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Much of his material is related to the creation of *Maus* and the transmission of trauma. In one of the more memorable panel sequences, Spiegelman shows a father passing on a "family heirloom" to his son.<sup>43</sup> When the son opens the locked chest, a monster flies out and starts to grow larger and larger. The father replies, "It makes you feel so worthless you don't believe you even have the right to breathe!... And—just think—someday you'll be able to pass it on to YOUR son!"<sup>44</sup> Spiegelman's newest work implies that the "monster" (or shadow or disease) will continue to grow, and because he cannot escape from it, he must continue to exercise his demons. As these examples demonstrate, there seems to be no end in sight to Spiegelman's "working through." But what his numerous revisions have done is make an increased number of repetitive, invasive memories publicly available for his readers and viewers to experience. Thus, the excessive repetition and re-contextualisation in Spiegelman's work has created even more opportunities to elicit the effect of trauma in those who are exposed to it. Just as he was bombarded with stories and images of the Holocaust as a child until he too was traumatised, he is now bombarding his readers and viewers with the same contagious horror.

#### **IV Cognitive Colonization**

The direct connection between experience and remembrance is now not severed, rather, it is redrawn to capture the complexity of effects of that experience beyond individual memories.<sup>45</sup>

The oversized pages of *In The Shadow of No Towers*, which allude to the monumental nature of 9/11, are cluttered with detailed, multi-coloured images. Hence, the white spaces between the



panels and in the margins are particularly striking. The silences within these gutters demand readers to fill the space with meaning and weave their own experiences into the narrative, making them spectators as well as contributors to the events being represented. As Louise Rosenblatt states,

the reader's attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience—external reference, internal response.... Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolized as he senses them. The symbols point to these sensations, images, objects, ideas, relationships, with the particular associations or feeling-tones created by his past experiences with them in actual life or in literature.... Thus built into the raw material of the literary process itself is the particular world of the reader.<sup>46</sup>

The responses the text evokes in the reader, which will be informed by the reader's unique storehouse of memories and experiences, will affect the way cultural memory gets transmitted to subsequent generations. The reader's connection with and proximity to the event will inevitably shape and distort what is remembered and eventually transmitted. In the introductory note to *In The Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman writes,

Only when I traveled to a university in the Midwest in early October 2001 did I realize that all New Yorkers were out of their minds compared to those for whom the attack was an abstraction. The assault on the Pentagon confirmed that the carnage in New York City was indeed an attack on America, not one more skirmish on foreign soil. Still, the small town I visited in Indiana—draped in flags that reminded me of the garlic one might put on a door to ward off vampires—was at least as worked up over a frat house's zoning violations as with threats from 'raghead terrorists.'<sup>47</sup>

Because of readers' wide range of exposure to the event itself, the cultural trauma presented in Spiegelman's text will affect them in extremely diverse ways. For instance, I feel more connected to Spiegelman's image of the frazzled family helplessly watching 9/11 footage from their couch. A New Yorker who was actually running through Manhattan during the attacks, however, would probably have a substantially stronger reaction to Spiegelman's depiction of the

chaotic streets. Others, who were geographically and culturally isolated from the event, may be completely immune to the contagious effects of trauma in Spiegelman's text. Although these distinctions may seem obvious, it is crucial to acknowledge them because the experiences readers bring to the text will affect the way they interpret history for the next generation. Returning to Rosenblatt: "Continuity in the life of a literary work depends not only on the continuing existence and potentialities of the text but also on continuity in the history of its generations of readers, in their basic human experiences and concerns, that sometimes even transcend cultural boundaries."<sup>48</sup> In other words, the meaning of the text and the meaning of history will continue to evolve as new readers bring disparate experiences/memories to it. In this sense, the text says and means more than the author could have ever intended. It takes on a life of its own.

The continuity of the memory of cultural trauma is dependent on the reader's active participation in the text. To some extent, readers have to participate in all texts. In order to understand any type of narrative, from novels to films, the reader/viewer must fill in or bridge the silences and omissions. However, postmemory narratives require the reader to be more active. The silence and omissions in postmemory narratives create what Hirsch calls "an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance."<sup>49</sup> In this space, the reader must identify with the victim or witness to be affected; they must actually be implicated in the trauma to understand and empathise. For a transmission of trauma/history to happen, then, the reader must be affected enough by the traumatic event being represented to consider it meaningful and relevant. In other words, a cognitive colonisation must occur in the reader. What is perhaps most fascinating about this notion of colonisation is that the reader has to work to become infected by

the trauma. A reader who takes a passive or naive approach to Spiegelman's texts will not be nearly as affected as a reader who actively makes meaning of the silences and omissions. And, whether or not we can make meaning and connect with history will determine how history is perceived in the future. The work involved in the transmission of cultural trauma is literally the work of the reader.<sup>50</sup>

The experimental form of Spiegelman's texts also serves as a model of past trauma infiltrating or colonising itself in the present. There are many instances in *Maus* when the past and present coexist within a single panel. Spiegelman often uses interruptions in the narrative to achieve this effect. For example, in the second volume of *Maus*, Vladek describes the cremation pits where prisoners were ordered to pour gasoline over both live and dead bodies: "And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better."<sup>51</sup> His words float above distressing images of screaming mice faces engulfed in flames. Then, the next panel abruptly reveals a mundane scene of Vladek in his kitchen with his son and daughter-in-law. His gaze is fixed on the clock. The time reminds Vladek of the work he has to do around the house, and this realisation pulls him (and the reader) out of the world of the past.<sup>52</sup> Although he continues to talk about the Holocaust, the images do not shift back to the cremation pits. Rather, the reader now has access to both the story of the past *and* the present narrative action. An amalgamation of the past and present occurs within a single moment: Vladek complains, "It's dishes to clean, dinner to defrost, and my pills I haven't yet counted," and Art blurts out, "I don't get it... why didn't the Jews at least try to resist?"<sup>53</sup> Art's outburst is just one of many instances of the past invading the space of the present in *Maus*.

The colonization of past trauma into the present is also visualised in *In The Shadow of No Towers*. Spiegelman includes a supplement of early twentieth-century comics, such as *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Kinder Kids*. He specifically chooses comics dealing with issues related to 9/11: patriotism, war, fear, terror. These comics were pulled from the archives to remind us that terror and trauma have always been a part of the past, that this is nothing new. Horrific experiences and memories are embedded in the fabric of our history and will continue to resurface. The comic characters from another time have an invasive presence throughout the text. For example, they literally fall from the gutters at the top of page eight. Below them Spiegelman writes: “The blast that disintegrated those Lower Manhattan towers also disinterred the ghosts of some Sunday Supplement stars born on nearby Park Row about a century earlier. They came back to haunt one denizen of the neighborhood addled by all that’s happened since.”<sup>54</sup> The recycled “Sunday Supplement stars” serve as yet another depiction of the persistent colonisation of past trauma in Spiegelman’s (and the reader’s) present psychic state.

## V To What End?

Memory may not be judged using the same criteria of accuracy, coherence, analysis which conventional history puts on in its attempt at objectivity, for often in the course of remembering, historical facts are metamorphosed, lost or misinterpreted. Memory offers a metaphorical approach to fact; it simultaneously represents fact whilst attempting to understand the fact it represents. It is the medium we employ to remind ourselves who we were, who we have become, who we will be.<sup>55</sup>

By examining the transmission of postmemory and cultural trauma in terms of a disease, I do not mean to suggest that Spiegelman’s aim is to inflict psychic strain on the reader. Rather, it seems to me that psychic strain is an inevitable and necessary symptom of this transmission. In other words, the transmission of cultural trauma depends on the spreading of the postmemory-induced

“infection.” Nevertheless, Spiegelman’s work does raise some disturbing ethical questions, such as, is it morally acceptable to position your readers in the mind of a Nazi? Here I think it is crucial to remember that although Spiegelman provides us with the medium, we ultimately inflict the pain and trauma on ourselves. As I have argued, it is up to the reader to activate the medium. Therefore, we incorporate ourselves into the story. We infect ourselves. Spiegelman’s own position as a direct descendant of Holocaust victims differs from that of the reader. His entire life has been saturated by memories of the Holocaust; he has made it clear that traumatic memories of the Holocaust were an inescapable and damaging part of his upbringing. His readers, on the other hand, have a choice of whether or not they want to fully interact with the medium that could potentially reproduce the effect of trauma.

But there is still the question of what Spiegelman is trying to accomplish by giving readers the opportunity to colonise themselves, to confront and participate in past trauma. What, if anything, can we learn from works of postmemory? My own anxiety about this subject is echoed by essayist Jonathan Rosen: “What if studying radical evil does not make us better?”<sup>56</sup> Does the memory of trauma only remind us that horrific acts have the potential to happen again and again? Will participating in Spiegelman’s texts only intensify the fear and anxiety that terrible events bring about? Like many Holocaust scholars, Gillian Banner rejects the notion of postmemory having any sort of redemptive function. However, this does not imply that works of postmemory are useless or without hope. Banner writes,

The memory of the offence confirms that this is what humanity is capable of and with such a past there can be no hope for the future. And yet, the memory of the past demands that there be a future; there must be something after such a past and that something must contain hope and possibility alongside despair and the moral vacuum.<sup>57</sup>

I believe that this “something” is the driving force behind works of postmemory: the reader. Although it may be impossible to find closure (emotional/psychological, narrative, etc.) or comfort in remembering cultural trauma through art, film, literature, or any medium, we can still use these mediums as a way to grapple with contemporary social and personal issues. Because works of postmemory emphasise the past’s effect on our present personal development, they create the potential for personal and social change. Therefore, it is imperative that we gain an understanding of ourselves and figure out how we are connected or disconnected to historical moments, traumatic or not. We must understand our own relationship to history before we can change the future.

The personal element of postmemory also activates the transmission of cultural trauma and memory. There must be a reason for history to be passed on to the next generation. If we cannot find meaning in history, then it is of no value to us. By making apparent the past’s role in shaping the present, postmemory narratives give the past a relevance that is lacking from those traditional historical accounts criticised by Gadamer. As Young notes,

The historian has long demanded the impossible feat: to ignore the present moment as we tell of past ones. In effect, historians have asked themselves to forget the present as they recount the past. Rather than pretending to forget why something is worth remembering and telling in the first place we need to acknowledge that the history we write is worth writing at least partly because of where we stand now.<sup>58</sup>

Works of postmemory move well beyond seemingly objective historical narratives. What is so refreshing about projects like *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers* is that they do not try to disguise our contemporary and deeply personal connections to the past. In addition, Spiegelman’s texts show us how we come to know, understand, and transmit our personal and cultural histories. He makes visible an epistemology of postmemory that could provide historians with a more

effective and meaningful model for communicating the past to the present. Spiegelman's approach to historiography<sup>59</sup> is particularly remarkable because he is able to translate the epistemology of postmemory to works that record his direct memories. By applying the ways of knowing he presents us with in *Maus* to a modern account of cultural trauma, Spiegelman adds a new dimension to the way we write and record contemporary history. In both *Maus* and *In The Shadow of No Towers*, he shows us how he has begun to know and understand himself through a historical lens. Thus, Spiegelman not only illustrates *how* history gets passed, filtered, fragmented, and distorted from generation to generation. More importantly, he shows us *why* we need to remember the past in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Writing History, Writing Trauma" in Jonathan Monroe, ed., *Writing and Revising the Disciplines* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> I am not suggesting that Spiegelman set out to create a historical model. However, it is impossible to ignore the historiographical possibilities in his project. Spiegelman's unique mode of storytelling makes transparent how we come to know about history (personal and cultural) and how that history has shaped us. It is this transparency, I think, that could provide a potential model for revising the way we write and record history.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory" (*Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1, 2001, 5-37).

<sup>7</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale II: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 45.

<sup>8</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* In other words, Spiegelman is reminding his readers that his work is yet another new construction of Holocaust memories and should not be mistaken for anything else.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 27.

<sup>12</sup> Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Michael G. Levine, "Necessary Stains: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History" in Deborah Geis, ed., *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 63-104), 72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Here I am referring to *Maus I*. In *Maus II* Spiegelman does make references to his anthropomorphising, particularly in the “Time Flies” chapter (39-74). However, even in the second volume, explicit definitions are absent and Spiegelman’s decision to assign specific animals to different ethnic groups is never elaborated on.

<sup>18</sup> Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Hirsch, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Hirsch notes that postmemory “need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available” (10). Thus, anyone can become susceptible to a postmemory-induced “infection.”

<sup>24</sup> Spiegelman uses the word “commix” to distinguish his work from the popular notion that “comics” are expected to be funny. He states, “I prefer the word commix, to mix together, because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story.... the strength of commix lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to actual human thought than either words or pictures alone” (Young, 18).

<sup>25</sup> Spiegelman, *Shadow*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 101.

<sup>27</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 67.

<sup>28</sup> Levine, 98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Dena E. Eber and Arthur G. Neal, eds., *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 174.

<sup>31</sup> Spiegelman, *Shadow*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> As the title of *Maus I* (*My Father Bleeds History*) indicates, Spiegelman is also drawn to this metaphor.

<sup>33</sup> Hirsch, 29.

<sup>34</sup> For an in-depth analysis and multiple examples of Spiegelman’s Holocaust recreations, see Hirsch’s exceptional essay, “Surviving Images.” The 1994 CD-ROM version of *Maus*, which provides a genealogy of each panel, is also an excellent resource for examining the images in closer detail.

<sup>35</sup> Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> Spiegelman, *Shadow*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Due to the shorter amount of time that has passed since 9/11, this pertains mostly to the Holocaust images.

<sup>38</sup> Hirsch, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Young, 34. Since the publication of Young’s book, “The Road to Maus” has been exhibited in museums across the world.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> In Spiegelman’s document, the symbols that represent the four letter word in his title are hand-drawn. My reproduction of the title is as close as it can get to the hand-drawn version, but it is not completely accurate. See the Fall 2006 issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review* to view the original title.

<sup>43</sup> Art Spiegelman, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?!” (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 82.4, Fall 2006, 30-43), 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 48.

<sup>46</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 11.

<sup>47</sup> Spiegelman, *Shadow*, i.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenblatt, 121.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Because the reader is the main vehicle of cultural transmission in postmemory narratives, it is necessary to acknowledge that memory often gets distorted by the emotional and psychic reactions we associate with the event.

<sup>51</sup> Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 72.



<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Spiegelman, *Shadow*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Gillian Banner, *Holocaust Literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the Memory of the Offence* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 9.

<sup>56</sup> Young, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Banner, 34.

<sup>58</sup> James Young, "Between History and Memory: The Voice of the Eye Witness" in Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler, eds., *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003, 275-284), 283.

<sup>59</sup> Again, Spiegelman would not classify himself as a historian. I am suggesting, however, that his work deserves to be treated as a historiographical model.