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### Comics realism and the Maus event

*Comics and the dynamics of World War II remembrance*

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#### Publication date

2019

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Spanjers, R. (2019). *Comics realism and the Maus event: Comics and the dynamics of World War II remembrance*.

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# Introduction:

## Comics and the Dynamics of World War II Remembrance

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There have never been as many ways to remember World War II as are available to us today. You can visit museums, participate in reenactments, listen to family members tell theirs or other's stories, play computer games, read books, listen to podcasts, visit monuments, watch films or documentaries, travel to historical sites, take courses, and still would not have begun to exhaust the options. Remembering the war, moreover, is not a purely private matter, to be attended at will. World War II is woven into the identities of nations, communities, families, and individuals. It is taught in schools and remembered publicly by officials, besides being available for consumption and contemplation across media. When the remembrance of the war changes, therefore, the way in which nations, communities, families, and individuals think of themselves changes with it. Precisely because of its continuing impact, the remembrance of World War II, instead of being comprised of one narrative that remains largely unchanged

through time, is continually amended, added to, and subtracted from (van Vree and van der Laarse 8-9; Ertl and Rigney 2). World War II memory culture should therefore be seen as a dynamic process in which many stories, told in different ways, shape and reshape both past and present.

Yet, despite its omnipresence in contemporary culture, World War II is also often seen as defying representation. Those who aim to represent it have struggled with the practical impossibilities and moral implications of this daunting task. The atrocities of World War II, with the Holocaust at the center, are a limit case for representation in its many forms. In historiography, the *Historikerstreit* is the most prominent example of the impact of the catastrophic past<sup>1</sup> on representation.<sup>2</sup> While initially waged over the positioning of the Holocaust in relation to the broader history of West-Germany, one of the many results of the *Historikerstreit* was that questions concerning the limitations of historiographic representation began to be discussed more widely within the discipline (Ankersmit 2007, 12). In literary studies, philosophy, and memory studies, the latter of which is at least partly founded upon the analysis of the afterlives of the Holocaust, there exist a considerable number of studies of the representation of World War II and the Holocaust in a wide range of different practices and media.<sup>3</sup> Here, the stark contrast between Adorno's often misread prohibition of Holocaust representation<sup>4</sup> and the ubiquity of it in the public sphere sparked a discussion over the ethics of historical representation that is still ongoing. The works of the writers and artists that are studied in this context demonstrate the ways in which the catastrophic past defies narrativization and forces creators to find new forms to present the past in. Take for example Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), a famous novel that describes the bombing of Dresden. In this novel, Vonnegut ingeniously collapses past and future into the present in order to more adequately depict the continuing impact of the catastrophic past on the life of the protagonist.<sup>5</sup> Another example can be found in the work of the French

photographer Christian Boltanski, who confronts his audience with the Holocaust through archival installations rather than by narrating this past in a more traditional form (van Alphen 69). While these and other representations can and have been called successful, however awkward this word is in this context, their creators are often highly critical of their ability to do justice to the past that they attempt to represent and often also express these doubts in the works themselves. Letting the past lie, however, is out of the question. While it is difficult or impossible to represent the catastrophic past adequately, it is far worse to forget it. World War II representation thus continues to exist between the impossibility of adequately representing a past that is too horrible to convey, and the compulsion and/or obligation to never forget.

As fewer and fewer of those who have firsthand experience of the war are still alive, its remembrance has become more noticeably reliant on mediation. The increasing dependency of World War II memory culture on media combined with drastic changes in media landscape and hierarchies has reignited and repositioned debates concerning World War II representation. Instead of questioning if World War II representation is acceptable and/or possible, scholars have started investigating in what ways the remembrance of World War II changes when the media and/or practices through which it is remembered change. One of the results of this shift is that—alongside a wider move from a textual to a more visually oriented culture<sup>6</sup>—the central position of text as the most reliable and realistic form in which to remember has been challenged by the increasing popularity of a range of visual media.

Comics does not immediately spring to mind as one of the likely challengers of more traditional forms of World War II remembrance. Photography and documentary film might be more probable candidates based on their perceived realism. Yet a well-documented tradition of World War II representation in comics exists going back to the wartime period itself.<sup>7</sup> Up until the 1990s, however, World War II

representation in comics was approached by scholars and critics mostly with disdain. The medium's widespread association with frivolity, heroics, childishness, and gratuitous violence—characteristics which a vast majority of World War II comics did very little to combat—eclipsed the few comics that attempted a more critical treatment of war (Witek 1989, 13; Mickwitz 13).<sup>8</sup>

Besides its relatively low cultural status, comics about World War II were also seen as problematic because they are drawn. In the context of World War II, any representation that strays too far from what is considered historical truth and a realistic way of depicting that truth invites severe criticism. Because drawing is, above all, associated with subjectively based renditions of the world (Rawson 1; Kenin 6; Berger 149), comics seems predisposed to aid rather than dispel the critiques of those set against the medium's attempts at World War II representation. That is, even when comics render the past in near-photorealistic detail, the fact that they are drawn causes them to be perceived as less suitable for historical representation.

Set against this double disenfranchisement of comics in relation to World War II representation, the success of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991) appears all the more spectacular. *Maus*—Spiegelman's rendition of his father's eyewitness account of Auschwitz and the crippling burden of this past on father and son—was noticed by mainstream critics as early as 1985 (Tucker). Critical consecration, already budding in early reviews, soared with the comic's nominations for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1986 and 1991, and came to full fruition with the special citation awarded to Spiegelman by the 1992 Pulitzer Prize Board.<sup>9</sup> Academia snapped to the attention of *Maus* in 1987. Throughout the 1990s, *Maus*' fame in academia steadily rose, until in 1997 and 1998 it came to occupy a central position in the then booming field of memory studies. In a short period, a sizable number of the most prominent memory scholars, such as Marianne Hirsch, Andreas Huyssen, Dominick LaCapra, and James E. Young, published on *Maus* in the context of their

broader research. Through the publications of these scholars and others, *Maus* became a prominent object within the field of memory studies and as such was not only assured a place in research but also on the reading lists of humanities courses around the globe.

The popular and critical success of *Maus* changed the perception of comics' abilities for historical representation. Since *Maus*' success, there is little reason to question if comics can or should represent World War II. Instead, I investigate how—through *Maus*—comics came to be seen as capable of realistic representation and, subsequently, in what ways other comics amend, add to, and subtract from *Maus*' particular style of war representation.

What is needed to begin to answer these questions is an approach to realism that allows room for the contradictions inherent to it. Despite the stringent, and often valid, critiques of realism by postmodern thinkers such as Roland Barthes, it is still a concept that is central to contemporary cultural criticism, and perhaps even more so in the context of World War II representation, where the catastrophic past forces the question of realism back into view (Rothberg 2000, 8). What is perceived as realistic World War II representation, however, has differed greatly over time and among different audiences. Indeed—as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter—realism has a history that is far less a gradual perfection of technique than it is a development of or quarrel over taste. What is positioned by creators and perceived by audiences as realistic is under constant negotiation. In this research, I approach realism as a site of continual struggle between various modes of representing the past. These modes, moreover, have a tendency to authenticate themselves as realistic by challenging or demystifying others. Because my view of realism is relational, my analysis of it is contingent on the specific context in which I study it. In relation to World War II representation in comics since *Maus*, I single out three groupings of formal and/or cultural characteristics that are most prevalent in the struggle surrounding realism: the subjective, historiographic and

mechanical modes of realism. These modes—which I elaborate upon in the subsequent chapter—can be distinguished from one another based on how they propose to bridge the gap between representation and reality. In short, where subjective realism privileges subjective experience, historiographic realism relies on historiographic method, and mechanical realism on mechanical reproductions of the world. Each of these modes comes with its own poetics. Subjective realism, for example, can often be discerned in first-person narration and point of view drawings. Historiographic realism, in turn, frequently favors omniscient third-person narration. And mechanical realism, finally, can be found in World War II comics in reproduced or retraced photographs.

In this thesis, I consider realism in relation to World War II representation in comics on two different but connected scales. First, the perceived realism of comics in relation to World War II representation in other media, and second, the way in which comics, through their formal affordances, can incorporate different modes of realism into their representations of the past.

In order to better understand the perception of the comics medium's affordance for historical representation in relation to other media, I investigate the reception of *Maus* in Anglophone and Germanophone academia in chapter two. Instead of analyzing historical representation in *Maus* directly by way of a close reading, this chapter examines the impact of the success of *Maus* on the perception of comics in academia. My study of the reception of *Maus* shows how scholars—in order to distinguish comics from other media—have emphasized the ways in which the comics medium affords a rendition of the past and its presence in the present from the point of view of the experiencing subject.<sup>10</sup> This focus on the suitability of *Maus*, and with it comics, to the subjective mode of realism, I argue, has obscured what I see as comics' greatest strength regarding the representation of the past: its ability to incorporate and juxtapose different modes of realism. Because they combine various ways of representing the past

that stem from different media, comics can be read as interrogations of the interactions of a continually expanding media landscape with the dynamics of World War II memory culture. Analyzing a comics page that combines, for example, historiographic third-person narration, drawings, dialogue, and photographs not only shows that comics' representation of the past is more multilayered than is often thought, it also offers insights into how different ways of representing the past coexist in World War II remembrance.

In the three chapters that follow my discussion of the reception of *Maus*, I bring this broader affordance of comics for historical representation into view. For my case studies, I have selected three comics that are quite dissimilar in terms of cultural context. They do not only come from different comics cultures—Dutch, American, and Japanese—but they also differ in terms of mode of publication and intended audience. The diversity of these case studies should not be mistaken for an attempt to offer up a completely exhaustive view of World War II comics since *Maus*. Instead, what binds these comics together is that each of them, in its own way, exemplifies comics' ability to combine different modes of realism in texts and images. Bringing these particular comics together in this thesis allows for an exploration of comics' affordance for historical representation that expands from the dominant approach to it set into place by the success of *Maus*. Furthermore, the fact that each of these comics is so affluent in terms of the number of different ways of representing the past that it combines, allows for a reading of them that draws in broader discussions concerning the (im)possibility of representing the catastrophic past in comics as well as other media.

The first of these close readings focuses on the juxtaposition of different kinds of texts in comics. The fact that comics are a primarily visual medium by no means prevents text from playing an important role in them.<sup>11</sup> In comics, the visual characteristics of texts can be made to matter in ways that are largely foreign to literature and historiography. Investigating comics' text, therefore,



offers insights into the ways in which texts change when they are embedded in a visual medium, and how these changes impact the remembrance of World War II that is established through them. In my analysis of text in comics, I focus on Peter Pontiac's *Kraut* (2000). *Kraut*, which is generally considered the most famous of Pontiac's works, was created in direct reference to *Maus*. *Kraut* suits my analysis because in it, text is more prevalent and more significant than is the case for most World War II comics. On the pages of *Kraut*, Pontiac deals with a past that is problematic both on a personal and a societal level: his father's collaboration during World War II. For the countries that were occupied by the German forces during World War II, collaboration is a highly emotionally and politically charged subject.<sup>12</sup> What distinguishes Pontiac's depiction of the collaboration of his father are his attempts to incorporate multiple perspectives on it, including that of his father. Besides his own and his father's (hand) writing, *Kraut* also contains several short historiographic texts as well as parts of court transcriptions. In my analysis, I show how these different texts can be distinguished from one another based on their visual appearance and position on the page. I examine, moreover, how Pontiac makes use of the visual characteristics of text and page composition to forge meaningful relations between these texts. By combining these different texts on the pages of *Kraut*, I argue, Pontiac both authenticates his version of the past and questions the capabilities of different ways of writing as means to bring the past into the present.

In my second exploration of comics' ability to combine modes of realism, I research how a supervillain origin story attempts to meet the demands for realism in Holocaust representation by drawing on the strengths of other media. While the success of *Maus* made World War II representation in comics more feasible, it did not by any means eliminate or even alleviate the pressures exerted by the catastrophic past. In order to demonstrate in what ways comics creators use combinations of modes of realism in texts and

images to render the wartime past adequately, I investigate Greg Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico's *Magneto: Testament* (2008–2009). Pak and Di Giandomenico's comic recounts the experiences of a young Jewish boy in Nazi Germany. Max and his family are forced to flee when the Nazi's rise to power. They are caught, however, and he is transported to Auschwitz. Seen in its wider context, the representational difficulties that haunt *Magneto: Testament* are abundantly clear. Unlike *Maus*, which is an independently published alternative comic, *Magneto: Testament* is a superhero comic published by Marvel. Readers of this comic, moreover, are expected to know that young Max will survive Auschwitz and grow up to become the supervillain Magneto, a well-known character of the *X-Men* comics series. With *Magneto: Testament*, Pak and Di Giandomenico have to navigate the considerable distance between a superhero origin story in comics form and more traditional conceptions of Holocaust narratives. In chapter four, I consider how they juxtapose modes of realism in images and texts in an attempt to do so.

In my final close reading, I focus on the interactions between the different kinds of images that can be found side-by-side in World War II comics. In the case of a majority of World War II comics, it would probably be possible to point to at least one instance where different kinds of images are combined on the page. It is not uncommon to find, for example, photographs scattered throughout a World War II comic. At the same time, most World War II comics largely consist of a singular and relatively consistent graphic style. And while it is true that for all World War II comics graphic style has a significant impact on the past that is represented, a particular graphic style becomes especially recognizable when it is contrasted with another.<sup>13</sup> In order to bring out the affordances of comics in this area, I analyze Shigeru Mizuki's *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* (1971).<sup>14</sup> In this fictional rendition of his wartime experiences as an infantryman in the Imperial Japanese Army, Mizuki makes nimble use of his ability to draw in a wide range of different graphic styles.

On the pages of *Onward*, therefore, schematic, or cartoony, images co-exist with near-photorealistic ones. In my analysis of Mizuki's work, I analyze in what ways the juxtapositions of graphic styles on the pages of *Onward* challenge the preconception that drawing always only connotes subjectivity. I argue that *Onward* confirms that the range of possibilities for the representation of the past in drawing is much more extensive than is often assumed. A reading of how graphic style is made to matter in Mizuki's work thus allows for a broader examination of how different ways of visualizing the past impact its presence in the present.

In more than just chronology, this thesis picks up where Joseph Witek's seminal *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (1989) ends: with the burgeoning success of *Maus* in academia. I am not the first to succeed Witek in researching historical representation of comics.<sup>15</sup> The success of *Maus* was followed by a steadily growing number of analyses of World War II representation in comics. To a large extent, these studies—as I show in more detail in my reception study of *Maus*—focus on comics' ability to represent the past from the point of view of the subject. Many of them do so because it allows them to distinguish World War II representation in comics from that in other media.<sup>16</sup> By looking not only at what sets historical representation in comics apart from other media, but also at the ability of comics to incorporate ways of representing the past that are native or more common to other media, this research broadens the perspective on historical representation in comics to show the complexly layered representations of the past of which comics are capable.

Another benefit of pivoting towards comics' ability to incorporate and juxtapose different modes of realism in image and text is that it reveals comics as miniature doublings of the broader discussions that drive the dynamics of World War II memory culture. Besides as innovative contributions to memory culture, then, I also read comics as reflections of it. What the comics brought

## INTRODUCTION

together by this research show is how different ways of bringing the past in the present work alongside or in opposition to one another in World War II remembrance. By studying these experimentations with World War II representation in comics form, this research thus aims to foster a better understanding of the manifold way in which comics represent the past as well as contribute to our knowledge of the impact of an ever-widening media landscape on the remembrance of World War II.