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Comics realism and the Maus event

Comics and the dynamics of World War II remembrance

Spanjers, R.

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Comics and Realism

As early as 1922, the Russian-born linguist Roman Jakobson complained about the often-confusing ways in which the term "realism" was used by art historians and literary scholars. In his essay, "On Realism in Art," Jakobson notes that while at face value the concept of realism is used to describe a certain verisimilitude of a work of art to everyday reality, the apparent clarity of this definition dissipates because perceptions of what is realistic change over time and among different currents of art (Jakobson 20).

Regardless of Jakobson's critique of the concept, realism remained a fashionable concept in the study of literature. Georg Lukács referred to it—in the context of his study of the historical novel—in order to indicate a connection between superstructure and base from which he attempted to remake literature into an asset, both in the study of the historical development of capitalism and in the struggle against it (Lukács 285). Erich Auerbach's *opus magnum*, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) is, as its title indicates, devoted to a study of realism throughout Western literature.

Auerbach tackles the different and often contradictory forms of realism that confuse any attempted unidirectional approach to the concept in the study of literature. He acknowledges that there are different ways in which the outside world is represented but sees them converging over the history of literature. According to Auerbach, the "swings of the pendulum" of realistic representation can only be understood in the context of a wider historical development that culminates in the union of its different modes in the realism of Stendhal and Balzac; a revolution that contests the classical and renaissance separations of styles in literature by bringing together "everyday practical reality" in a tragic framework (Auerbach 554). For Auerbach, the development of Western literature equals the development of mimesis. Something similar can be said of Ian Watt's use of the concept in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), in which a modern, subjective realism—a view of the world from the point of view of the embedded subject—is posited as the central defining characteristic of the development of the novel form in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. For Watt, the novel is separated from preexisting literary forms because it begins from the particulars of everyday reality, instead of from standardized formal conventions, characters, locations, and plots (Watt 13-16).

Through the work of these and many other scholars, realism has become interpretable as a set of formal poetic conventions, a specific period in literary history, and a focus on "everyday practical reality," even if these three readings of the concept are at times mutually exclusive. Notwithstanding their many differences, however, most approaches to realism in art from before the 1960s have in common an implicit trust in the existence of a reality to which representations refer. Reality, in these approaches, can still be used as a rule by which representation can be measured.

This strict separation of reality and representation is what was challenged by postmodern critics. In "The Reality Effect" (1968), Roland Barthes starts to unravel it in an analysis of Flaubert's description of Rouen in *Madame Bovary*. Barthes succeeds in showing

that in representation, what seems real is always necessarily an illusion, and never reality itself. The trick of realism, for Barthes, is that it hides itself in plain sight by pretending to be the one thing that it can never be: reality. Instead of conjuring into existence the city of Rouen, Flaubert's words are merely signifiers referring to that real (Barthes 1989, 148). For Barthes, realism becomes an effect, and whoever falls for this magician's trick, moreover, has not been paying close enough attention to the structure of language. In the words of Joseph Hillis Miller: "[The] chain of substitutions and transformations creates illusion out of illusion and the appearance of reality out of illusion, in a play of language without beginning, end, or extra linguistic foundation" (Miller 123). From such a perspective, language can never establish contact with that which is outside of it, if such a world outside of language even exists. Under postmodernism, the study of realism is downgraded to a study of illusions.

Such a conception of realism leads to two seemingly contradicting results. The first is a fundamental distrust in the human's ability to grasp reality through representation. From this point of view, human perception is always stuck in representation. If this is the case, it is not possible to establish a reality alongside which representations can be judged more or less realistic. That which is appears to audiences as real cannot be anything but another illusion of representation. The second result is that the disconnect from reality established through postmodern theory is often experienced as a loss. The theoretical impossibility of grasping reality through representation has become the basis for a renewed desire for the real. For Linda Hutcheon, the desire to address this loss of connection to the historical, political and social is a central characteristic of the postmodern historical novel. Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) also reads postmodernism as an expression of loss: loss of the subject (11) and a loss of connection to history:

> [W]e are now, in other words, in "intertextuality" as
> a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and
> as the operator of a new connotation of "pastness"
> and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of
> aesthetic styles displaces "real" history. (19–20)

Jameson argues that postmodern culture turns to history because history is out of reach, because it is locked away in an endless circle of representation. Both these scholars thus see the explosion of historical culture under postmodernism as a knee-jerk reaction to the loss of connection to reality.[17]

Starting from this loss central to postmodern culture, contemporary movements away from it, such as cosmodernism,[18] metamodernism,[19] or new sincerity,[20] have styled themselves as departures from the all to theoretical reflections on loss in which postmodernism is said to be stuck, and a reengagement with the world and its socio-political issues, conveniently forgetting that a turn towards the world was also a central characteristic of postmodernism.[21] But even if these new currents allow for a breath of fresh air, it is doubtful that such good intentions are enough to remedy the loss at the heart of postmodernism. Instead, these new movements might be only slightly different expressions of the same loss that afflicted postmodern culture.

For all its confusions, realism thus remains a concept that is central and structuring in contemporary cultural criticism. This is certainly the case for my discussion of post-*Maus* World War II comics, in which the impossibility of reaching reality through representation is lamented or contested, instead of accepted. Besides the fact that realism remains one of the primary goals of creators of historical comics, the concept also invariably surfaces in reviews of World War II comics. Critics and audiences often reward works that remain "true to the past." In the shadow of the catastrophic past, it seems, realism becomes less an esthetic choice and more an ethical

obligation. Or, in other words, the sheer gravity of World War II as subject matter continues to push questions concerning realism back into view (Rothberg 2000, 8).

Yet as I have already discussed in the introduction, realism presents the creators and audiences of comics with a difficulty: comics are, on the one hand, drawn, and on the other, traditionally associated with the frivolous and fanciful (Witek 1989, 13; Mickwitz 13). As I argue in the subsequent chapter, however, the immense success of *Maus* caused a shift in the perception of comics' ability for historical representation. Because of *Maus*' success, drawn images and dialogue could make claims to realism that rival those made by photographs and historical discourse. *Maus* can thus be seen as having turned the perceived weaknesses of comics in relation to realism into strengths. But even if it ultimately privileges a subjectively based approach to historical representation, *Maus* also incorporates ways of representing the past that seem to contradict its emphasis on experience, such as photographs or historical writing. The copresence in Maus of these different ways of establishing a realistic representation of the past suggests a need for an approach that focuses on the often-contradictory directionalities of different forms of realism that coexist in World War II comics.

For me, analyzing realism in comics does not mean comparing them to a specific current in the history of art or literature, or examining how comics recover the experience of the common soldier or civilian. Nor does it mean completely reducing the aims of creators and readers to effects. Instead, I approach comics alongside a conception of realism that allows me to bring into frame the contradictions central to historical representation in comics form. Doing so enables an investigation along the lines suggested by previous studies of realism in the arts without limiting the analysis to one set of formal and/or historical characteristics by which works are judged. In this research, examining realism means analyzing the continual struggle fought over it between different ways of

representing reality. And while the number of ways to represent reality is unlimited, it is possible, within a specific context, to abstract the complete range of representational positions that can be taken into groupings of formal conventions and/or subject matters. I refer to such groupings as modes of realism. The most privileged of these modes within a specific context is the one that is called (most) realistic. What is perceived as realistic, however, as Jakobson already demonstrated, is subject to constant change. In any given context, therefore, there exist alongside one another several prevalent modes that each produce a different kind of realism through different means. These different modes of realism cannot be compared based on some kind of absolute reality. Any conception of an absolute reality that can be used as a rule to measure representation is still subject to postmodern critique. Instead, a mode of realism is authenticated through its positioning in a broader network of modes of realism. In other words, it is not a verisimilitude to an "outside world" that authenticates the representation of the past in a photograph, but its perceived realism in relation to other forms of representation. In this research, I investigate the existing perceptions concerning the realism of historical representation in comics and analyze the different means through which World War II comics attempt to make use of these perceptions and/or modify them.

This approach to realism is based on Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) and Ernst Gombrich's *The Preference for the Primitive* (2002). Both these works historicize realism and envision it as a development in which one mode of representation follows or overtakes another. The work of these scholars demonstrates that realism thrives on opposition. The realism of one set of conventions, Jameson argues, is always realistic in relation to another set of conventions, and not in relation to a fixed notion of reality. With such a conception of realism, *Don Quixote* is realistic because it renders the realism of medieval romance literature illusory, and *Madame Bovary* is realist because it demystifies the romance novel (Jameson 2013, 4).

In art, a juxtaposition of Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) with William Bouguereau's *The Birth of Venus* (1879) serves as an introductory and thus necessarily simplistic impression of the way in which Gombrich sees the preference for the primitive as a rejection of one form of realism in favor of another (Gombrich 2002, 202-203). In these two images (see figs. 1 and 2), two modes of pictorial representation are at odds with one another. The realism of the first, Bourguereau's, is based on the training of the artist in an institution and his ability to portray the human figure with the correct anatomy and perspective. The second, Picasso's, emerges from the idea that the subject's impressions of the world are much less ordered and studied. In Picasso's case, the artist attempts to portray the body as it is perceived subjectively by emphasizing different points of view and focus. Gombrich traces the movement between these two approaches to artistic expression through the history of art. And while Gombrich ultimately prefers art that moves away from the primitive, even by way of primitivism (297), the historical overview he provides with *The Preference for the Primitive* brings into focus the question of how different currents of art engage with the question of realism. In his history of tastes, Gombrich uncovers, much like Jameson, that realism in visual art does not involve a gradual process towards perfection but a field of struggle between different ways of seeing reality. Like literature, albeit in very different ways, art always implies a specific way of experiencing reality, instead of reality itself. In the work of both of these scholars, analyzing realism is not so much about verisimilitude, but about the ways in which reality is claimed and what is at stake in these claims.

These images are only available in the printed thesis.

Fig. 1 & 2: Bouguereau, William. *The Birth of Venus*. 1879, Musée d'Orsay, Paris and Picasso, Pablo. *Demoiselles D'Avignon*. 1907, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

While Jameson and Gombrich's studies of realism occupy a central position in my approach to realism in World War II comics, I also deviate from their approaches. In relation to Gombrich, I resist his reversal at the end of *The Preference for the Primitive*—one already implied by word choice—in which great art is posited to display "wealth and mastery of resources which transcends ordinary human comprehension" in comparison to art that displays the "understandable reaction" of the preference for the primitive (Gombrich 2002, 297). For all the moves and counter-moves that his work exposes in the history of art, Gombrich, in the end, is first and foremost concerned with advancing his own aesthetics, rather than encouraging a study of the movements and shifts of different ways of rendering the world in relation to one another. With respect to Jameson, I separate his conception of realism as oppositional from the subsumption of this notion of realism into what he calls "a historical and even evolutionary process" whereby realism, having just been unbound quite spectacularly, is chained to literary history anew (Jameson 2013, 6).

   In this research, I make use of both Jameson and Gombrich's approaches to realism as a site of struggle that tends to function in terms of opposites but let go of their attempts to find a resolution for its large-scale historical development. Instead, I hold that the struggle for realism is fundamentally unresolvable. What I do instead of grasping for yet another resolution, is analyze the ways in which the struggle for realism surfaces in the specific context of World War II comics.

Broad and Narrow Comics Realism

As already mentioned in the introduction, I relate World War II comics to realism in two distinct, yet interconnected, moments, which I identify by the terms broad and narrow. By comics realism in the broad sense, I mean the realism of comics in opposition to other media. Comics realism in the narrow sense indicates comics' ability to incorporate and juxtapose different modes of realism in a single representation of the past. My treatment of comics realism in the broad sense is here limited to my reception study of *Maus*, and thus necessarily builds on already existing research in this field. The most important of which is Thierry Smolderen's analysis of Rodolphe Töpffer's (1799-1846)[22] work and writing in relation to French Academicism (27-28), and his discussion of drawn images versus photography, both of which can be found in *The Origins of Comics* (2014). Smolderen's history of comics is central to my conception of representation in comics in relation to other media. Basing his views on Gombrich's discussions of Töpffer in *Art & Illusion* (1960) and *The Preference for the Primitive*, Smolderen demonstrates that Töpffer's conception of his art of drawing was constituted on a rejection of the rules of perspective and anatomy prescribed by Academicism. Töpffer argued that his art allowed the artist more direct access to "the principle of life" (Töpffer qtd. in Smolderen 28). In order to establish his art against the background of Academicism and its focus on naturalistic depictions of the physical world, Töpffer emphasizes

that comics require little or no training and flow freely from the intuition of its creator (Töpffer 11).[23] Even if it might not be entirely true that no training is needed, it is important to recognize that comics were, from their outset, posited as intuitive and expressive in opposition to the stilted and training-intensive style that dominated the mid-nineteenth century French academy. Töpffer, two decades before the infamous Salon des Refusés of 1863, declares the goal of his art to be the expression of the experience of the artist, rather than the representation or creation of objective reality through studied methods.[24] The earliest positioning of comics thus foreshadows the later positioning of *Maus* as demonstrating comics' suitability to historical representation from the viewpoint of the subject.

In my discussion of "the *Maus* event," I examine how comics came to be seen as capable of historical realism through the success of *Maus* and argue that *Maus*' success was dependent on a postmodern reconfiguration of the initial subjective connotations of the comics medium as described by Smolderen. It is only in the context of a postmodern study of memory culture that the subjective approach to historical representation in *Maus* could be perceived as realistic. Thus, the rise of the study of comics in an academic context became closely connected to a positioning of comics as a medium that foregrounds a subjective, rather than an approach to representing the past that is grounded more in, for example, historiography.

What was obscured by the *Maus* event, however, is that the catastrophic past often forces comics to move beyond a purely subjective approach. For comics creators such as Spiegelman and Mizuki, focusing purely on their own viewpoints might be considered a form of betrayal of the ones who experienced alongside them.[25] Faced with the limits of representation, creators search for other ways of representing the past in comics in both image and text. One such way can be found within the medium's history itself. Besides comics that foreground the subjective through overt use of caricature, there are also comics that seek to approximate a different kind of realism

by employing a more naturalistic graphic style. Here, the historical fictions of Hal Foster, the creator of *Prince Valiant* (1937-present) spring to mind. Foster's naturalistic style was not influenced by comics artists (Kane), but by illustrators such as Howard Pyle (1853-1911) and E.A. Abbey (1852-1911). The resulting style claims historical realism by rejecting the overt caricature with which comics drawing was primarily associated. One need only look at the work of the countless artists who drew the many installments of the British war comics series *Commando Comics* (1961–present) (see fig. 3), and many similar series in the United Kingdom and the United States,[26] to see that a more photorealistic representation in comics has long been, and continues to be, part of war comics' graphic repertoire.

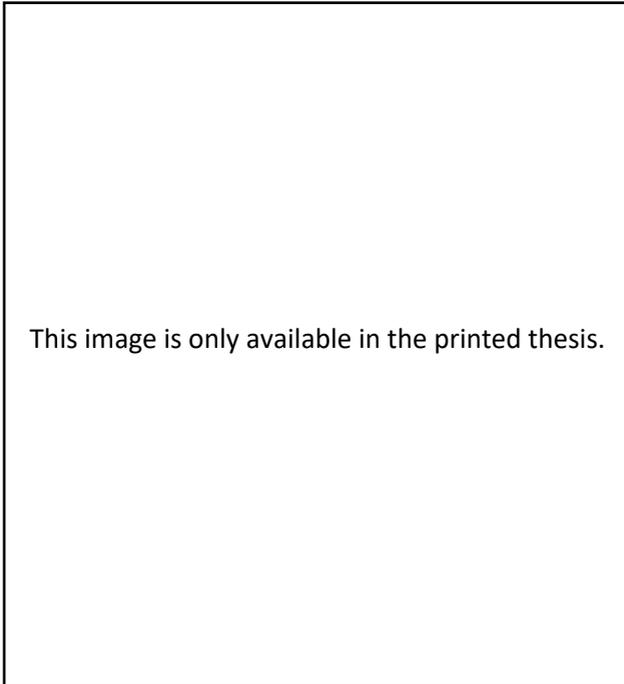This image is only available in the printed thesis.

Fig. 3: Parsons and Solbes. *Sudden Death!*. *Commando Comics,* no. 114 (re-issued as no. 631 in 1972 and as no. 4696 in 2014), 1964, 5.

If comics realism in the broad sense designates the perceived realism of comics representation in relation to the expression of the past in other media, comics realism in the narrow sense considers the way in which comics, in combinations of texts and images on composed pages, incorporate and juxtapose different modes of realism. While the success of Maus cemented the perceived suitability of comics to a subjectively based representation of the past, comics are, as Hal Foster and his many present-day disciples show, by no means limited to subjective realism.

Instead, comics have the ability to combine different modes of realism in their representations of the past. This, more than anything, is what sparked my interest in World War II representation in comics. On a single spread, comics can combine different positions in the development of realism as portrayed by Jameson, Gombrich, and Auerbach. In World War II comics, historical discourse can be found in close proximity to drawings, handwriting to photographs, and dialogue to maps. Comics do not only authenticate themselves by committing to one mode of realism, they can also do so by combining modes of realism. By doing so, these comics invite contradiction into their depictions of the past. For if one mode of realism authenticates itself mainly in opposition to another, what happens when they are deployed together? How different World War II comics navigate the contradictions that arise from combining modes of realism can only be examined case by case. What can be said on the outset, however, is that the contradictions that comics face because they combine different modes of realism can be read as smaller scale repetitions of the contradictions that drive the dynamics of World War II remembrance. Analyzing realism in World War II comics thus offers insight into how different ways of representing World War II in different media are related to one another, and how a conception of the past can come into being from these juxtapositions.

Modes of Realism in World War II Comics

In the World War II comics that I have studied in this research, three modes of realism are most prevalent: subjective realism, historiographic realism, and mechanical realism. In this section, I distinguish these modes from one another by looking at the different ways in which they approach the gap between representation and reality. Before I do that, however, it is important to note that the three modes of realism that I begin to formalize in this section are nothing more than tools. I use them to dissect and engage with the plurivocal representation of the past in comics. By reading these modes of realism into comics, the different ways in which the past can be represented in one comic and the traditions and practices on which these forms of representations are based become discernible and, to an extent, categorizable. Extending the use of these tools beyond the specific context for which they are created—World War II comics—pushes them past their limits.

The Subjective Mode of Realism

To understand the subjective mode of realism' approach to the gap between reality and representation, we must start from Kant's famous distinction between the noumenon, the object as it exists independently from human perception, and the phenomenon, the object as it appears to the human senses. From the perspective of the subjective mode of realism, humankind only has access to the world as it appears to us and the primary way in which we have access to this world, is through sensory experience. In this sense, subjective realism is aligned with phenomenology:

> All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular points of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (Merleau-Ponty ix)

It follows that within subjective realism, the imitation of experience is the most realistic form of representation. Subjective realism is thus centered around a phenomenological outlook which prefers perception and description over analytic synthesis (Merleau–Ponty x). In relation to the other modes of realism prevalent in World War II comics, subjective realism stresses that experience comes prior to all representations of the past produced by historians and that the objectivity of mechanical representations is illusory.

But even if subjective realism authenticates itself through recourse with the idea that an embedded subjective position comes prior to all forms of representation, it does not dispel all doubts concerning the universality of subjective experiences, and frequently exposes the limitations of the human perspective. Theoretically, subjective realism need not be self-reflexive or critical about its abilities to represent the reality of the past. It is possible to imagine a World War II comic that is completely convinced that its own subjectively driven account of a historical occurrence is absolutely real and transferrable unproblematically to others. Yet as the question "is this flower red" is in practice quite different to "why did my father join the SS during the war," and "how should I represent my father's choices," comics creators are often unsure about the equivalence of their answers to those of others, especially under the pressures of a catastrophic past.

This emphasis on self-reflexivity in the deployment of subjective realism is specific to the context of post–*Maus* World War II comics. Although self-reflexivity need not necessarily be present in subjectively realist accounts of the past, *Maus*, with its relentless commitment to self-reflexivity, set a peculiar standard for the authentication of subjective realism, which was characterized well by Charles Hatfield with the concept of ironic authentication (2005, 140). The subjective mode of realism in the post–*Maus* context authenticates itself by taking stock of its own limitations and flaunting them, as well as basing its representation of the past in human experience.

The mode of subjective realism, in the context of post-*Maus* World War II comics, is thus based on the notion that embedded subjective perception underlies all other forms of knowledge of the world, and is often combined with the idea that the most realistic way to represent the past within this worldview is by making explicit the limits of any subject's perception and representation of the past. The theoretical basis for my readings of the subjective mode of realism stems mostly from my readings of the many analyses of *Maus* that can be found in the subsequent chapter. In terms of the poetic characteristics, many of the most recognizable aspects of historical comics can be considered as favoring the subjective mode of realism. Think, for example, of the inclusion of a self-reflexive author-character, handwriting, dialogue, point of view shots, schematic drawing, and a focus on remembering, testimony, and eyewitness accounts.

The Historiographic Mode of Realism

The historiographic mode of realism approaches the gap between reality and representation by deploying historiographic methods in order to produce texts that can be called history. Such methods, contrary to subjective realism, entail a different kind of distrust in the capabilities of the remembering subject.[27] In this sense, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur notes in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), "the gift of writing is held […] to be the antidote to memory, and therefore a kind of challenge opposed by the truth claim of history to memory's vow of trustworthiness" (Ricoeur 2004, 138).[28] Yet historiographic realism is also a thoroughly human practice, rooted in the same limitations that lie at the foundation of subjective realism. In lieu of a resignation to these limitations along the lines of the subjective mode of realism, historical realism attempts to overcome some of them by referring to both the methods and the discipline of history. According to Michel De Certeau and Paul Ricoeur's work in this field, the methods of history roughly consist of three phases: documentation, explanation/understanding, and representation,

which are taught and preserved by an—ideally—collaborative community of historians.

This causes historiographic realism to be at a different distance to the object of reconstruction than its subjective counterpart. While the testimony or eyewitness account of subjective realism often concerns the one who sees and thus builds on a notion of closeness, historiographic realism is first and foremost concerned with the other, or others, instead of with the self (De Certeau 3; Ricoeur 1988, 147). This distance is at times seen as a strength that allows for a more detached and therefore objective approach, and at other times as a weakness that loosens the historian's grasp of the past. In relation to the often-oppositional relation between subjective and historiographic realism, historiographic realism's relation to mechanical realism is less antagonistic. Mechanical documents are often used as source materials for the historian's reconstruction of the past. Still, even mechanical documentation must be subjected to the historiographic method before it can become history. For the historian, the perception of the machine, as is the case for the perception of the subject, is to be treated with distrust.

Historiographic realism can be recognized in World War II comics mainly in techniques of writing:[29] omniscient third-person narration, the use of visual and textual references, and academically structured presentations of different sources in the guise of written arguments, all of which are discussed in greater detail in my case studies. Occasionally, moreover, direct references to collaboration with historians or institutions can also be encountered in World War II comics.

It is not my intention to ignore the radical changes that the discipline of history has undergone in relation to postmodern challenges to the presumed veracity of its writing (White; Ankersmit 1989). I certainly do not want to portray historians as unflinchingly trustful of their methods and the truths that are produced through them. A strong tradition of self-critique is one of the greatest strengths

of both the historiographic method and the texts that it produces. Here, it is important to repeat that these modes are not to be taken as absolute forms that remain unchanged, but as ways of engaging with the demands of realism; the historiographic mode of realism is not the same as the historiographic method.

Take, for example, the self-reflexivity that can seem to be well suited to the subjective mode of realism. Under the pressures exerted by postmodern theorists mainly on historiography's mode of representing the results of its methods, a kind of self-reflexivity has become part of historiographic method as well.[30] The difference is that while the subjective mode of realism often aims to reconstruct the past as it was experienced by a certain subject, historiographic realism is based on the historian's implicit promise to create history, that is, a transparently written representation based on the evaluation or understanding of documentation. Where self-reflexivity in the subjective mode of realism often considers the limitations of the subject's perception of what happened in the past—that it can be incomplete or colored by the subject's emplacement, for example— self-reflexivity in historiographic realism most frequently concerns a critiquing of the self's ability to collect documentation, impartially explain or understand it and transparently write it down. Thus, while self-reflexivity occurs in both modes, it targets the ways in which the modes operate in different ways.

The Mechanical Mode of Realism

The last mode of realism common to World War II comics is the mechanical mode of realism. Mechanical realism bridges the gap between representation and reality by taking the human out of the equation. In opposition to the embedded realism of the subject or historiographic method, the mechanical mode of realism presents its viewers/readers with the realism of mechanical perception in the shape of photographs, films, or other kinds of records produced by machines. The mechanical is perceived as realistic because it exists

completely outside the human, exceeding, in a certain sense, both the world available to the subject and to historiography. Poetically, the use of mechanical realism in comics often implies a move away from the subjective connotations of the medium in the broad sense by way of incorporating not human, but machine-made images. Human-made machines, being operated by humans, however, are not altogether "nonhuman." The "nonhuman" is best characterized as forms of agency that lie outside the sphere of the human, such as viruses (Thacker 4; Bonneuil and Fressoz 32). Instead, following McKenzie Wark's terminology, the notion of the "inhuman" must be understood in order to grasp the role of mechanical realism in comics. The inhuman is an intermediary position, in which the human and the non-human can meet: "The apparatus is the *inhuman* that mediates the *nonhuman* to the *human*, each of which is at least in part coproduced by this very relation" [emphasis in original] (Wark "Slavoj Žižek"). In my analyses, the notion of the inhuman indicates a representation of the world that comes into being through the perception of human-made machines, which are relayed within a context—post-*Maus* World War II comics—that is thoroughly human.

Before I can move on to discussing how the different texts and images that can be found in comics tend to be divided alongside the modes of realism, I want to stress that even though the three modes of realism are often differentiated from one another on the basis of seemingly absolute differences, it must be kept in mind that within the confines of a comic, the differences between the modes can only be relative. By positioning a near-photorealistic drawing alongside a cartoon, even a technique as thoroughly subjective as drawing can be imbued with mechanical realism. The same relativity applies to the different texts that can be found in comics. The mode of realism evoked by a particular kind of text is at least partly determined by the differences between this form of writing and the others with which

it is presented. In Peter Pontiac's *Kraut* (2000), handwriting can be differentiated from typewriting by stressing its uniquely subjective qualities.[31] However, when typewritten court documents are presented alongside handwritten accounts and typeset extracts from published books, the typewritten texts—due to their association with the obsolescent technology of the typewriter and in contrast with the typeset texts from books—also gain subjective, as well as mechanical, characteristics.

The advantage of conceiving the relations of modes of realism as relative instead of absolute is that it allows for an approach to the comics page that can encompass the convergence of the handwritten and the mechanical in the codified world (Flusser 40-41). In the time of *Photoshop*, photographs are hardly less malleable than drawings. What precisely is the absolute difference between different kinds of texts and images when all of them can, and in all probability, have been translated into code and back again; when comics artists draw using digital means and comics are read on websites and screens? The goal of my approach to realism in modes is not to separate different forms of representation based on their ontology, but to show how the comics medium affords the combination of a wide range of different kinds of writing and drawing. And how through these combinations, a conception of the past arises. From this perspective, the fact that one mode authenticates itself by demystifying another can also be read as a reaction to the loss of ontological difference that occurs when different ways of rendering the past are placed alongside one another in comic book form. In place of an absolute difference between the images and texts through which the modes of realism are constructed, a web of oppositional relations has been constructed that invites another kind of difference. If this difference is not continually pronounced, moreover, the different modes risk collapsing into the surface of the comics page.

New Wars in Text and Image

Examining the use of modes of realism in World War II comics means studying the representation of the past in a medium that is located, in both a contextual and formal sense, at the breaking point of the connection between history and the written word. Contextually, because the overwhelming success of *Maus* is part cause and part result of the breaking open of the domain of history in the second half of the twentieth century. This breaking open originated in critiques of the presumed objectivity of history's mode of production (White; Ankersmit 1989; Jenkins; De Certeau) and subsequently found wider expression in the increasing focus on the wide range of practices of bringing the past into the present in the emerging discipline of memory studies (Erll 2). Moreover, these academic shifts developed against the backdrop of widespread reevaluations of the boundaries between high and low culture, which shifted comics, a medium traditionally located in the very heartland of popular culture, into view of academia. Yet despite their inclusivity, a vein of iconophobia has been shown to exist in the foundational texts of the linguistic turn (Jay 1994, 14). Comics' visuality thus rendered them an anomaly in the paradigm that made them appear as an object of study. This problem that the image posed to language-based theories of culture was what led W.J.T. Mitchell to proclaim that a pictorial turn would follow the linguistic one (Mitchell 1994, 13).

The immense success of *Maus* at the end of the 1990s and during the 2000s is thus both an effect of and a generative force in discussions taking place that simultaneously concern the representation of the past in text and image, fact and fiction, high and low culture, and as history and/or memory. Following Mitchell's approach to image-text relations, not as an attempt to settle their relationality in a new, all-embracing semiotic theory, but as a way to read the "struggle" between image and text as laying bare "the fundamental contradictions of our culture" (Mitchell 1986, 44), the aim of my analysis of World War II comics is to study them as

objects which render visible the many difficulties that arise when one attempts to bring the past into the present. As such, this research can be envisioned as an analysis of the different oppositions of modes of realism as expressed through juxtapositions of texts and images.

What is needed, is a way to analyze modes of realism in World War II comics that takes into account but is not completely reduced to the significant role that image–text relations play in the comics medium. In order to do so, two tempting but ultimately reductive ways of considering realism alongside image–text relations need to be resisted. The first is a conflation of image and text through which one becomes the metaphorical proof of the other's realism. In criticism, such a switch from the pictorial to the textual or vice versa is often used in attempts to articulate the realism of a certain mode of representation. Many of those who write about realism aim to prove the realism of, for example, the novel by likening it to painting, and the other way around. One particularly early example of this can be found in Louis Edmond Duranty's introduction to the first issue of *Réalisme* (Duranty 1-2).[32] The ways in which image and text can start to approach one another in comics,[33] however, outdate such metaphorical extensions whereby the realism of one form is proven by likening it to another. In the practice of World War II comics, images can be used to show that which is unutterable, and words are used to speak that which cannot be shown. Instead of using images to confirm the realism of texts, comics are able to put the gaps between the two modes of expression to different uses. As I demonstrate in my case studies, the versatility of image–text relations in comics allows creators to put to use and interrogate the inexpressible through widely varied modes of combining images and texts. Comics thus uncover the inexpressible as a locus, rather than a vanishing point, of representation in post–World War II Europe.

Another approach to the linking of image–text relations and the modes of realism that must be resisted is the equation of a particular mode of realism with comics representation in either text

or image. Subjective realism is not restricted to either the textual or pictorial spaces on the comics page, nor are historiographic or mechanical realism. Instead, I will reserve some space for a productive messiness regarding the ways in which the different modes of realism are considered alongside the image/text divide.

I do so because the pages of comics contain much more manifold combinations than only that of image and text. Rather than thinking of comics as combinations of image with text, I approach them as combinations of images with images, texts with texts, and these texts and images with one another. *Maus*, for example, does not continually juxtapose subjective images in the form of point-of-view shots, to name one example, with omniscient third-person narration. On the contrary, one of the strengths of *Maus* is that it is able to blend different types of images and texts, thus operationalizing the different modes of realism in a much more complicated way than through a one-dimensional opposition along the lines of image and text. One of the central goals of this thesis is to argue against the simplification of comics representation into a univocal image-text relation by demonstrating how historical comics combine a wide range of different kinds of images and texts and by doing so explore and interrogate the possibilities and limits of historical representation in comics form.

In my taxonomy of the different kinds of texts that can be found on the comics page, I remain as practical as possible. In terms of text, I distinguish between dialogue, first-person and third-person narration, onomatopoeia, and titles on both the basis of their visual embedding on the page and the content of the writing (Groensteen 2007, 127). It is best to leave more detailed considerations of the different functions of texts and the importance of their visual characteristics to the analyses of *Kraut* and *Magneto: Testament*, especially considering that the use of text in both of these works invites an in-depth discussion of functions of texts in World War II comics that would occupy too much space here.

In opposition to the discrete differences that can be found between different kinds of texts on the comics page, my approach to the different graphic styles that can be found in comics is necessarily more chromatic. Following Pascal Lefèvre, I consider graphic style as emerging when "replications of patterning in drawings" can be distinguished that are repeated from panel to panel (§4). By focusing on a number of markers of style—detail, deformation, line, distribution, depth, light and color—and the coherence with which they are used from panel to panel, one graphic style can be distinguished from another (§5).

Lefèvre's approach offers the grounds on which to distinguish different styles from one another; beyond that, a scale is required on which the different graphic styles of World War II comics can be compared. To do so, I position different graphic styles in relation to the two extremes of schematism and photorealism. My use of the term schematism builds on the work of Gombrich. The concept of schematism, Gombrich argues, implies that there exist certain socially constructed visual shorthands that can be used to effectively express events, people, and emotions.[34] Schematism, or the often-used synonym, "the diagrammatic," is thus used to denote a degree of abstraction away from that which is perceived as an objective representation of the outside world.[35] The more schematic an image, the more abstract, deformed, or open to interpretation it can seem. At the same time, for those who have the cultural background to read them, schematic images can effectively communicate a wealth of information in just a few strokes.[36]

At the other end of the pictorial spectrum that I use to compare different graphic styles in World War II comics stands photorealism. Before anything else, any notion of photorealism as objective in any abstract sense must be eliminated. It has been continually proven that photorealism is itself a convention that is based on mechanical and/or social conditions and used for representation.[37] However, it is also true that the particular set of conventions

headed by photorealism is also often regarded as objective to such a degree that any deviation from this set of conventions is perceived as a deviation from objectivity towards subjectivity and—within the context of the comics image—schematism. The photographic appears as objective through its mechanical realist connotations. That is, the photographic is experienced as a move away from human intervention and convention and towards a mechanical process of registering the outside world. This effect, moreover, is compounded by the use of photographs in historiography as relatively objective documentation. Conversely, venturing away from photorealism implies a higher degree of subjectivity. Because of the perceived absolute faithfulness of its representation, photorealism became a measure for representation in other media as well. This is why novelists, at the time of the Goncourt brothers and Émile Zola, were commended for "photographically" describing the world (Jay 1994, 112). In a similar way, graphic styles in comics that approximate the conventions of photographic representation can be called, to a greater or lesser extent, photorealistic.[38]

By relating the graphic styles of a comic to schematism and/or photorealism, the claims to realism of certain graphic styles can be analyzed. Doing so allows for a reading of the images of a comic that is able to contrast different styles with one another while refraining from making grand statements concerning the different ontologies of the images that can be found in comics. As was the case for the different modes of realism, and as I show in more detail in my analysis of *Onward*, different graphic styles authenticate themselves not by way of a direct connection to the "real" world, but by demystifying another style's claim to realism.

To reiterate, my analysis of modes of realism focuses on their presence in both the images and the texts of comics. When analyzing texts, I investigate the way in which the different kinds of texts that can be found on the comics page make claims to realism through their form and content. With images, I study both the depictions

themselves and the impact of graphic style on the depictions. That is, I analyze the way in which different ways of seeing the world are implied by drawing styles and how these strengthen or produce tension in the object that is depicted. Finally, I see the forms and contexts of images and texts as taking place within the overarching context of the comics medium, which affords the placement of the different elements out of which it consists in cooperative and/or conflictual juxtaposition with one another through page composition.

My opening up of the analysis of a singular image/text relation in World War II comics to an investigation of how different texts and images are placed alongside one another on the page synchronizes well with recent developments in comics studies. With the translations of Franco–Belgian approaches to the study of comics, emphasis has shifted from seeing the relation between image and text as primal and central to the medium of comics (Eisner 8), to a more integrated view of the comics medium and the place reserved within it for manifold relations not just between text and image but also between images and images, and texts and texts. Such approaches to comics consider the interaction between image and text within a more fundamental structure that might be called the language or system of comics (Sabin 46; Peeters 13–15; Groensteen 2007, 127–128; Saraceni 13–14; Hatfield 36–7; Cohn 2; Horskotte 45; Postema 2013, 81–2). Of these, the most central to my approach is Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (1999). Comics, according to Groensteen, should be understood as a system; a conceptual framework that enables various ways to tell stories. Groensteen's approach to comics requires a perspectival switch: instead of focusing on relatively small units of meaning such as the panel, or on a linear sequence of panels, Groensteen's point of entry for comics analysis is always initially the page, or spread, as a whole. Looking at the comic book page or spread, Groensteen describes the different kinds of places that occupy the space of the page (*spatio-topia*) and the different ways in which these places engage with one another (general and restricted

arthrology) (2007, 21–22). Neither the *spatio-topia* nor the *arthrology* takes precedence in the meaning-making process of comics. Rather, their relation is dialogic and recursive, meaning that it is through a specific combination of them that comics signify. Comics thus create meaning not just through what is said in them in separate images and texts, but also through the way in which they combine the different elements out of which they consist on the space available to them. In a slight deviation from Groensteen's terminology, I use the term "page composition" in order to refer to this process of spatial organization.[39]

Groensteen's claim that comics are a predominantly visual medium must also be understood from the perspective of comics as a system (2007, 8). In Groensteen's view, comics cannot be a neutral site of confrontation or collaboration between images and texts because the pages that facilitate this confrontation are anything but neutral. Each image-text relation in comics is already encompassed in a meaningful page composition, which follows a visual and not a textual logic. Groensteen's pronouncement of the primacy of the visual in comics thus follows from his conception of page composition as central to comics signification.

But while I read comics from Groensteen's perspective of comics as a system, I do not completely follow his approach to image-text relations in the medium. Groensteen's analysis of image-text relations closely follows Barthes' early work on the relation between image and text in *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1964). Groensteen adds to Barthes' notion of anchorage and relay five other functions: the effect of the real, dramatization, suture, control, and rhythm (2007, 134). My approach to image-text relations in comics does not seek to semiotically ground the possibilities of engagement. Instead, I intend to read the separations and couplings of images and texts as sites of confrontation that draw into them a history of thinking about the possibilities and limitations of image and text for historical representation. Groensteen's sketch of a semiotic theory of image-text relations within the system of comics has proved to be of little

relevance to the way of reading World War II comics that I develop here. Instead, I remain much closer to Mitchell's approach to image-text relations. From this perspective, the fact that the relation between images and texts is semiotically subordinated under a broader system of articulation does not diminish how comics can relate images and texts to one another in ways that play on preconceptions of the limits and possibilities of these forms for historical representation. Within Groensteen's systemic approach to comics—which can be read as abolishing image-text relations as the starting point of comics analysis—I therefore reclaim some space for the study of the juxtaposition between images and texts from a historicist perspective. That is, an analysis of the way in which image-text relations become significant because of their allusions to a cultural history of opposing images and texts, rather than through an innate or absolute semiotic difference.

Lacking the specificity of a particular analysis, it is difficult to comment on the ways in which the modes of realism interact with the images and texts that are combined in comics. By doing so I run the danger of making too general statements that are easily refuted. Keeping this danger in mind, I will attempt to make initial remarks regarding the paths of least resistance for the different modes of realism in post-*Maus* World War II comics. I choose to run this risk because offering some insight into the conventions for historical representation in comics here will allow me to more clearly state how and why they are followed or challenged in the subsequent analyses.

Subjective realism is well suited to both the images and texts of historical comics. As such, it is by far the most prevalent mode of realism in comics. In case of the images of World War II comics, the fact that most of them are drawn lends a subjective quality to them, even when they are rendered in near-photographic detail. Regarding the texts, it can be argued that dialogue and embedded narration point to a framing of the past from the point of view of a subject. The fact that comics text is often either handwritten or a font which

mimics handwriting also imbues the texts of comics with a certain subjectivity.

In comparison, historiographic realism is somewhat biased towards text as its natural habitus. History, after all, is a practice that is enveloped by writing on all sides. In *History, Memory, Forgetting*, Ricoeur writes that "the professional historian is a reader." (166); a reader who produces writing, one might add. Writing, then, is both the preferred source and the preferred mode of production for history (Burke 10; Horsley 1317). Moreover, certain types of writing that can be found in a number of post-*Maus* World War II comics, such as footnotes or omniscient third-person narration, refer more or less directly to historiographic discourse. The second half of the twentieth century has seen the hegemony of writing in history challenged in different ways. Images are more frequently included as historical sources, if not as a way of producing history. Furthermore, outside the disciplinary boundaries of history as practiced in academia, other visual modes of representing the past have steadily gained ground: films, photographs, monuments, and a wide variety of other practices can at least be said to have challenged the implicit hegemony of writing for the representation of the past.[40] Notwithstanding this slow rise of the image, however, text remains central to historiography both as its object and its product. In a medium that combines texts with images, therefore, I expect to find the mode of historical realism first and foremost in text. Alongside this initial expectation, however, it might be hypothesized that images too can be seen, to a certain degree, as realistic in a historical sense, especially when they are rendered in a photorealistic style. Think, for example, of the appearances of soldiers, machines of war, and land/cityscapes, which are often based on a combination of photographic—mechanical—sources and description taken from historical sources. Or think of a footnote that refers directly to an image, instead of a text. The historical mode of realism is thus, in the context of World War II comics, inclined towards texts, yet might be found in images as well.

The opposite is the case for the mechanical mode of realism, which from the outset looks to be more at home in images than in texts. In spite studies such as Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), the written world often still appears as decidedly more infected with notions of the subject than its visual counterpart. Language still implies humanity more directly than drawing or seeing, even if our way of seeing the world might be wildly different from that of other animals or machines. Images of the world are not perceived to be as connected to the human as stories of the world. As such, it is much easier to ascribe the inhuman to a depiction of the world than is the case with a description.

Invoking mechanical realism in comics can be somewhat difficult because of the perceived suitability of the medium to subjectively based representation of the past. Comics realism in the broad sense—that is, the perception of the realism of comics in relation to that of other media—has a dampening effect on the possibilities for mechanical realism in comics. At the same time, this also means that comics creators can use mechanical images and texts to thwart these expectations. Besides diminishing the possibilities for mechanical realism in comics, the perceived suitability of the medium to subjective realism can also provide a clear contrast against which mechanical images and texts speak loudly.

Having put forward my approach to World War II representation in comics, I can now turn to an investigation of the ways in which the struggle for realism surfaces in the texts and images of World War II comics. In the remainder of this thesis, I first consider one of the most significant moments in the history of comics realism in the broad sense: the *Maus* event. In the three chapters that follow my discussion of *Maus*, I examine how other World War II comics have furthered or departed from the perception of the affordances of the comics medium for historical representation that came into being with the success of *Maus*.