



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Comics realism and the Maus event

Comics and the dynamics of World War II remembrance

Spanjers, R.

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*.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

2.

The *Maus* Event

Though Spiegelman's project is as yet unfinished, the unprecedented critical reception for *Maus* has changed, perhaps forever, the cultural perception of what a comic book can be and what can be accomplished by the creators who take seriously the sequential art medium (Witek 1989, 96-97).

If there is such a thing as a World War II comic today, it takes place in a context that is thoroughly post-*Maus*. Not in the sense that it might be aesthetically or thematically past Spiegelman's comic, but in the sense that *Maus* is the defining work for all subsequent World War II comics. Rather than discussing *Maus* directly, this chapter focuses on the causes and effects of what can be called the *Maus* event. I use the term event here somewhat against the spirit in which the famous French historian Ferdinand Braudel uses it. Arguing in favor of history of the *longue durée*, Braudel denounced event-based history as a history consisting of only explosions, which emit "deceptive smoke" that hinder the understanding of processes

of history over longer periods (Braudel 1958, 727-728). To spectators standing further away, *Maus* certainly seems to envelop all World War II comics: covering preceding and subsequent efforts to render World War II in comics in smoke. Moving in closer, however, it quickly becomes clear that Spiegelman was neither the first nor the last to attempt to represent World War II in comics. That being said, the success of *Maus* has also made visible and possible subsequent publications and/or translations of World War II comics. The *Maus* event, then, has not only obscured—as a Braudel centered approach to the concept of the event in history would hold—but has also made visible World War II comics, yet in a particular way. Accordingly, my analysis of the *Maus* event first focuses on how Spiegelman's work became central to historical representation in comics, and second, on how the success of *Maus* created a mold through which other World War II comics had to pass in order to become visible.

Analyzing the *Maus* event means focusing on the reception of *Maus*, instead of the comic itself. In order to limit the scope of this reception history, I have elected to focus on the academic reception of *Maus*. Luckily, academic reception does include—through the work done by Kai-Steffen Schwarz (1993 & 1995), Thomas Lysak (2009), Ian Gordon (2010), Andrew Loman (2010), and Bart Beaty & Benjamin Woo (2016)—a wider reception history of *Maus*, albeit in a distilled and necessarily somewhat partial fashion. My analysis of the academic reception of *Maus* reveals the contours of a process of canonization as well as the formation of a poetics for historical representation in comics out of the perceived strengths of *Maus*.

In the reception study that follows, I will demonstrate how *Maus*' success coincided with both the rise of memory studies and discussions of the strengths and limits of postmodern historical fiction in relation to historiography in literary studies in the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. *Maus*' content and form suited the agendas of these disciplines and caused the work to be appraised by leading scholars of the field such as Marianne Hirsch, James E. Young, Andreas

Huysen, and Dominick LaCapra. The discussion of Spiegelman's work by these scholars caused *Maus* to become a canonic object within the fields of memory and literary studies. *Maus* as an object of study allowed scholars to demonstrate the potential of a distinctly postmodern testimony⁴¹ in opposition to more traditional modes of historiography, which, in turn, harmonized with memory and literary studies' centered attempts to strip history of some of its privileges and reposition it as just one of many practices of bringing the past into the present.⁴² The next phase of the academic reception of *Maus* revolves around the increasing popularity of comics as a subject of analysis. I argue that in the course of the 2000s, scholars aiming to increase the newly acquired position of the 9th art in academia emphasized the medium's suitability to the kind of representation for which *Maus* was being lauded, which resulted in a further cementing of the over-emphasis of comics' capabilities for what I have called, in the previous chapter, the subjective mode of realism. The investigation of the medium specific characteristics of comics thus became biased towards the particular kind of expression in comics that best fit both the particular comic that became so central to the medium's discussion in academia, and the position and direction of the academic disciplines in which it was initially welcomed. If there is such a thing as smoke emitting from the *Maus* event, it is the notion that comics are uniquely, and at times even only, suited to subjective realism. I certainly agree that subjectivity and its problems concerning the representation of the past are central to *Maus* and comics representation of World War II. Still, as I will argue, working from a line of thought present most distinctly in Ole Frahm's analysis of *Maus*, Spiegelman's representation of the past also incorporates other modes of realism. In the face of the overwhelming tragedy of the past, no one mode of representing the past can ever suffice. Seeing *Maus* as continually combining different modes of representing the past—subjective, historiographic, mechanical—reveals that the strength of *Maus* and other post-*Maus* World War II comics is not that

they are uniquely suited to a subjective approach to the representation of the past, but that they combine and put into dialogue different modes of representing the past in word and image. The ways in which World War II comics juxtapose different modes of realism—as I argue in more detail in the following chapters—strengthen and are strengthened by a number of formal and contextual juxtapositions, such as that between high and low culture, father and son, and image and text. Post-*Maus* World War II comics thus show the wide range of historiographic expression that is still possible between knowing that any seemingly transparent representation of the past is illusory and a denial of complete relativity in the face of the tragedy of the past.

Because of the scope of this reception study, it also comes into contact with the roles that Spiegelman's comic has played in other academic fields, such as oral history, memory studies, autobiography studies, and comics studies. In terms of academic reception, *Maus* is certainly the most successful comic book in existence and has profoundly influenced judgments concerning the kinds of comics deemed fit for academic treatment, and, subsequently, for use in various classrooms. Comics studies recent shift away from emancipation and canon creation has sparked a self-examination in the course of which scholars aim to rid it of its biases towards adult, (auto)biographic, self-reflexive, educational, historical, alternative, underground, literary, or artistic comics (La Cour 2016; Beaty and Woo 2016); biases set in place at least partially by the success of *Maus*. This chapter is clearly a part of this shift, but by no means do I aim to provide here a complete narrative of these canonization processes concerning *Maus* within the many fields in which it has played a role. Rather, I focus on the way in which *Maus*, through its success, became a synonym for historical representation in comics, and how this success obscured all but one specific kind of historical representation in comics.

A *Maus* Archive

The archive of publications on which this academic reception history is based was gathered together by searching for the search terms [MAUS]+[SPIEGELMAN] in the Bonner Online-Bibliography für Comicforschung, ProjectMUSE, JSTOR, University of Amsterdam Digital Library, Glasgow University Digital Library, and Picarta. These queries resulted in, after applying my selection criteria,⁴³ a list of 137 items. This list of items divides into five book publications, 22 book chapters, 42 essays in edited volumes, 67 essays in academic journals and one website.⁴⁴

The archive is limited to English and German. I have chosen to omit Dutch, my native tongue, because I only found one result in it, which, due to it only being available in Dutch, plays no role in the wider reception of the comic. I have also had to cut Francophone scholarship on *Maus*.⁴⁵ My limited grasp of the French language combined with the profoundly different discourses on comics, postmodernism and, subsequently, *Maus*, has prompted me to make this choice. Considering these omissions, this is certainly not a complete archive. Furthermore, I have not been able to gain full access to 28 of the 137 items in the list, reducing the number of texts I have been able to read for this chapter to 109.⁴⁶ These texts, I hold, nevertheless provide an adequate representation of the academic reception of *Maus* in German and English.

THE MAUS EVENT

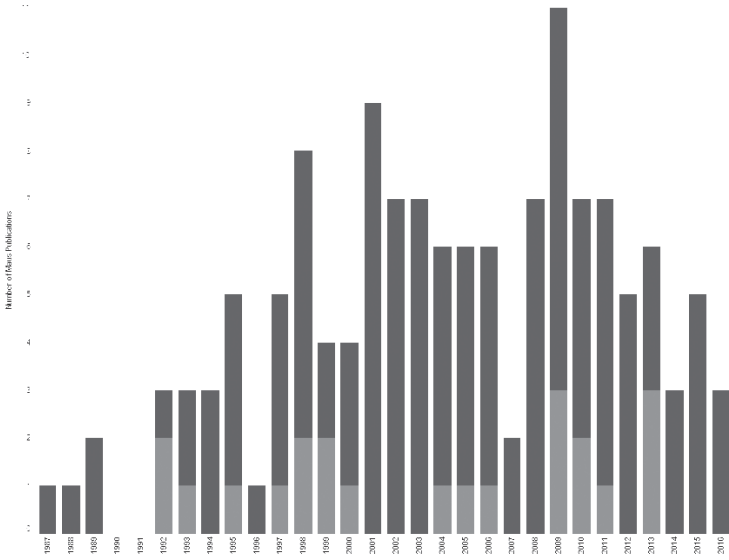


Fig. 4: Maus academic publications in English (light grey) and German (dark grey) between 1987 and 2016.

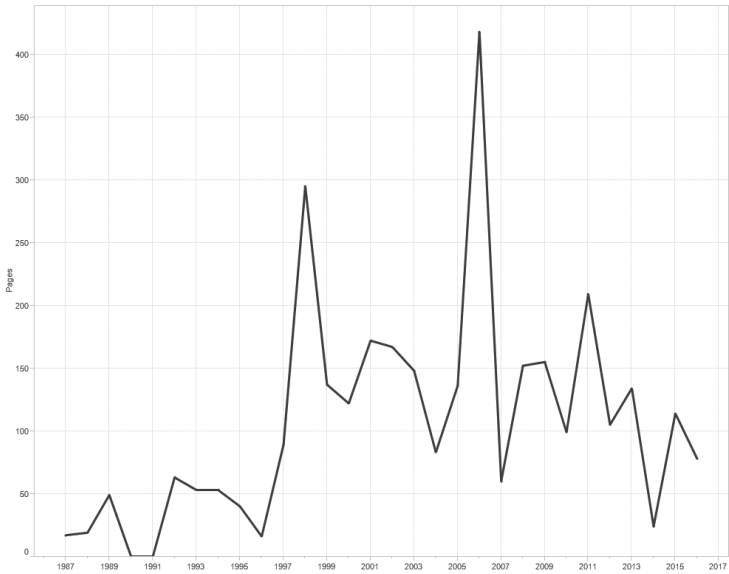


Fig. 5: Number of pages of academic texts on *Maus* per year between 1987 and 2016.

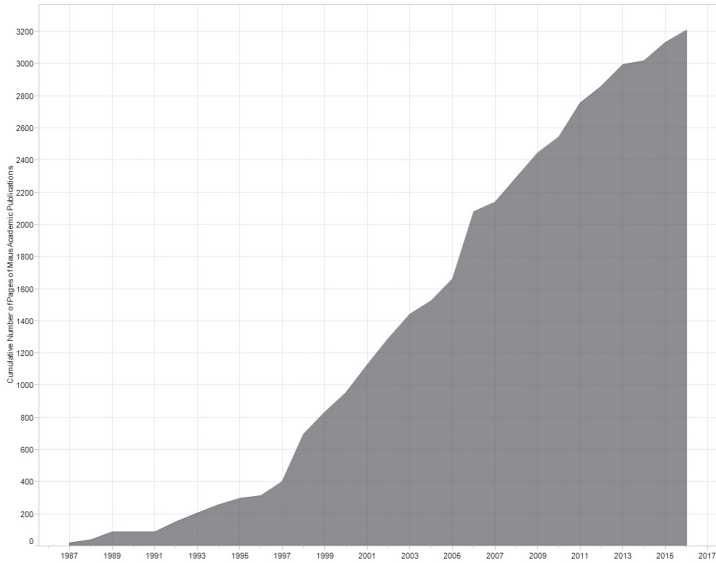


Fig. 6: Cumulative number of pages written on *Maus* in academia between 1987 and 2016.

Early *Maus* Scholarship

David A. Gerber’s “Of Mice and Jews: Cartoons, Metaphors, and Children of Holocaust Survivors in Recent Jewish Experience: A Review Essay,” published in *American Jewish History* in 1987, is one of the first academic publications on *Maus*.⁴⁷ Gerber’s article, which was published while *Maus* was still being created, already touches upon the motifs that return again and again in the reception of *Maus* in academia. First, Gerber notes the novelty of a comic book rendition of the Holocaust. Second, Gerber explores the concept of secondary trauma (Gerber 1987, 163–164), a notion that would later be developed in Marianne Hirsch’s influential reading of *Maus*. Third, through its use and continual self-reflexive questioning of the animal metaphor, Gerber argues, Spiegelman is able to subvert the cliché that the Holocaust had become in representation, through the overt use of a cliché. Fourth and final, Gerber identifies the aesthetic

of *Maus* with that of “post-modern movies and rock videos” (174) and thereby initiates a connection of the aesthetics of *Maus* and the poetics of postmodernism.

Of the other academic treatments of *Maus* that were published when *Maus* was still being serialized,⁴⁸ Joseph Witek’s influential “History and Talking Animals: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is the most significant.”⁴⁹ In this chapter from Witek’s *Comic Books as History* (1989), he characterizes *Maus* as an autobiographical project that heavily focuses on the process of its own coming into being (Witek 1989, 98). What Witek adds to the more narratively focused early discussions of Spiegelman’s comic is a sensitivity to the medium’s affordances in relation to the representation of the past. By connecting the animal metaphor in *Maus* to the funny animal tradition in comics (109), Witek is able to demonstrate, in much greater detail because of his knowledge of the comics medium and its history, how Spiegelman deploys a comics cliché as a means to defamiliarize and sidestep clichés of Holocaust representation (103). Besides aiding Spiegelman in escaping sentimentalism and kitsch, Witek argues that Spiegelman’s self-reflexive use of the animal metaphor also serves to authorize the narrative in an indirect fashion. By openly drawing attention to the ways in which the metaphor fails, Spiegelman demonstrates that no representation of the past can be complete, and that the only realistic representation of the past is one which often and openly admits to its shortcomings.

What these early discussions of *Maus* in academia begin to make visible is how the success of *Maus* coincided with an important shift in comics realism in the broad sense, through which comics representation began to be perceived, quite contrary to previous conceptions of the medium, as more realistic in relation to a wider media landscape. Paradoxically, it was the way in which *Maus* seemed to distance itself from historiographic and mechanic conventions—through the depiction of characters as animals and overt metafictional self-reflexivity—that made *Maus* appear as realistic. Where before the

heavily subjective and pop cultural connotations of the medium were considered an obstruction to realistic depiction of the past, hence the surprise expressed by so many to find such a topic discussed in a comic, now the connotations of the comics medium came to be seen as disarming clichéd forms of representing the holocaust. What previously made comics a troublesome medium for the representation of the past now made it especially suitable to it. In a relatively short period of time, the perceived clumsiness of the comics medium—that is, its inability to render the past in historiographic or mechanical realism because it is dependent on drawn images—became its strength.⁵⁰

The attention paid to the animal metaphor as the focal point of *Maus*' novelty and success, furthermore, is indicative of this tectonic shift in comics realism in the broad sense. As Witek also recognizes, Spiegelman's stylistic choices work to visually reduce the individuality of the characters he draws; distinguishing a mouse from the mice in Spiegelman's rendition of Auschwitz is near impossible. However, by continually reflecting on his stylistic choices Spiegelman wards off the dangers of dehumanization. The representation of humans as animals and the continual reflection on this stylistic choice, Gerber and Witek argue in extension of Spiegelman himself (Spiegelman et al.), is an encoding that allows *Maus* to circumvent the heavily standardized representation of the Holocaust that had taken hold of popular imagination. The basic shape of this argument is repeated in much of *Maus* criticism. Some show how Spiegelman's exaggeration of racist imagery actually serves to undermine any easy race-oriented reading of the work (Orvell 120-121; Ma 117). Others emphasize the graphic style in which the animals are rendered and argue, anticipating or extending Scott McCloud's argument concerning comics identification (McCloud 30), that these abstracted figures invite or obscure reader identification precisely because they are devoid of individual characteristics (Wilner 175; Smith 2015, 501). Only in a much wider context of Holocaust representation in comics,

film and literature is such a strange and elliptical argument conceivable; it took a postmodern and decidedly counter-historiographic poetics to make what seemed to be the least transparent medium for historical representation to be suddenly considered as best suited to it.

***Maus*, Memory Studies, Postmodernism, and Canonization**

Maus was incredibly well attuned, as Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo claim, to, on the one hand, 1980s academia with its focus on representation, memory, and testimony, and on the other, a rising interest in Holocaust narratives (20). But besides as only a proponent of these larger shifts in the landscape of academia, *Maus*, and the kind of poetics it proposed for the treatment of the past, should also be seen as a shaping force in these shifts. *Maus*, by combining a mass cultural form with modernist representational strategies (Huysen 1997, 175-176), offered a way out of the dichotomy between American “Holokitsch,” such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and European Holocaust art like Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Over the course of the 1990s and the 2000s, building on the fame garnered through the initial academic analyses discussed above, *Maus* became one of the central theoretical texts of the exploding field of memory studies. *Maus*’ fame started to soar especially when prominent scholars in the fields of memory and literary studies—Marianne Hirsch, James E. Young, Andreas Huyssen, and Dominick LaCapra—found in *Maus* an approach to the past that suited the direction of their researches, which, *grosso modo*, can be approached as investigating and/or elevating memory practices in relation or opposition to historiography. The work of these scholars set in motion a process of academic canonization that resulted in *Maus* becoming a fixed staple in the postmodern Holocaust fiction canon. The first and one of the most significant of these is Marianne Hirsch’s “Family Pictures, *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory” (1992). Hirsch’s conceptualization of post-memory, especially after the publication of her books *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997)

and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), in both of which *Maus* plays an important part, have been very influential in memory studies at large. Central to Hirsch's conceptualization of how children can inherit, in changed form, the traumas of their parents, is her reading of photographs in *Maus* (Hirsch 1992, 8-9). For Hirsch's argument, *Maus* is a "paradigmatic and a generative text [...], allowing her to carve out the aesthetic and political parameters raised within [her] particular reading of postmodernity" (Hirsch 1992, 13). Hirsch's analyses of *Maus* are attempts to pull memory away from the purely personal into larger, transgenerational structures. But Hirsch's approach, although it attempts to establish a wider, transgenerational impact of memory in society, still considers *Maus* as a work that, through its retelling of both the father and son's past, shows the possibilities of a representation of the past in a doubly-layered eyewitness—and thus subjectively based—account.

Andreas Huyssen also discusses the subjective point of view as a central characteristic of Spiegelman's representation of the Holocaust.⁵¹ For Huyssen:

Maus acknowledges the inescapable inauthenticity of Holocaust representation in the "realistic" mode, but it achieves a new and unique form of authentication and effect on the reader precisely by way of its complex layering of historical facts, their oral retelling, and their transformation into image-text.
(2000, 76-77)

Huyssen recognizes that *Maus*' double fixation on the past—that is, both the father's and the son's—is expressed through a critical incorporation and thus combination different modes of representing the past. However, Huyssen concludes that *Maus*, in the end, privileges oral testimony over the other modes that it incorporates (2000, 77).

Huyssen's emphasis on *Maus*' oral transmission of the memories of his parents (78), harmonizes both with literary studies' emphasis on texts over images and memory studies' privileging of memory over history.

In an article in *Critical Inquiry*: "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History" (1998), James E. Young approaches *Maus* slightly differently than Hirsch and Huyssen. This difference lies not so much in Young's characterization of *Maus* as a model of "received history, a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the way they are passed down to use" (669), which is enabled especially by the comics medium's ability to combine images and texts (676). Rather, what differentiates his discussion of *Maus* from those by Hirsch and Huyssen is that he focuses on the co-presence in *Maus* of an insistence on seeing the work as reality and a realization of the impossibility of any real representation of the past (697-698). In the face of this insolvable contradiction, one possible solution is an integrated history that combines historiography with memory and resists the need for closure (668). *Maus*, for Young, is not directly an example of such an integrated history, but an illustration of the dilemmas that call for such a historiography (669), which, in itself, is already quite valuable. Young, focusing more on *Maus*' visual dimension, locates in comics the ability to combine different moments in time as well as "the artist's own aching inadequacy in the face of [...] reality," (675). This, in turn, enables a showing and telling of both the act of testimony and what is testified, which, for Young, can be considered a combination of memory and history (677)—a combination, moreover, that allows for these different modes of representing the past to critique one another.

In a book published in the same year as Young's article, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (1998), Dominick LaCapra locates in *Maus* a similar dual devotion to accuracy and irony in the face of the traumatic past (146). Michael Rothberg published

Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation (2000) two years after Young and LaCapra's texts. Even if Spiegelman's work, which is featured on the cover, is only briefly discussed in the introduction, Rothberg's conception of traumatic realism as consisting out of two elements—documentation and narration (100)—that seem to run contrary to one another, but that are brought together in face of the demands of the traumatic event (100), is indebted to Young and LaCapra's readings of *Maus*.

Hirsch, Huyssen, Young, and LaCapra's discussions of *Maus* from a memory studies perspective should be considered, alongside a number of other memory studies focused texts,⁵² as converging with, or at the very least very close to literary studies focused approaches to *Maus* that were published over the course of the 1990s and the early 2000s. Some of these studies approach Spiegelman's comic from the sub-field of autobiography studies, a framing that, as evidenced by Rick Iadonasi's 1994 article "Bleeding History and Owning his [Father's] Story. *Maus* and Collaborative Autobiography," cannot but approach first and foremost the subjective realist side of *Maus*. Other analyses of *Maus* from a literary studies perspective from this time also tend foreground the subjective in *Maus*. Thomas Doherty, in "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust" (1996), even goes as far as to conclude that Spiegelman's hand-drawn cartoons render photographs "pallid and duplicitous" (82), thus positioning comics' graphic style as a victory over photorealism, rather than in continual dialogue with it.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and its characterization of historiographic metafiction, serves as the conceptual foundation on which many of the literary studies-based analyses of *Maus* in the late 1990s and 2000s were built (Orvell; Martin; Berlatsky 2003). Hutcheon herself saw *Maus* as a good example of what she christened historiographic metafiction (2009, 4). By being at once realistic and profoundly distrustful of the "transparency of both its visual and verbal media" and the genres of historiography

it deploys, Hutcheon argues, *Maus* is said to practice in art what has “obsessed theorists of historiography for several decades now” (2009, 11). Hutcheon positions *Maus*’ brand of historical representation against the more traditional conceptions of historiography that were being challenged by postmodern theorists. In unison with Hutcheon’s positioning of *Maus* in the corner of postmodernism and therefore in opposition to traditional historiography, the wider positioning of *Maus* alongside memory and literary studies and against history caused scholars to emphasize how the comics medium allowed for a representation of the past focused on the subject, and, subsequently, muted the medium’s other capabilities. This is not very surprising in light of Spiegelman’s at times almost obsessively self-reflexive portrayal of the Holocaust and its afterlives, which suits postmodern attacks on traditional historiography well. A wide majority of subsequently written discussions of *Maus* roughly follow the outlines set in the studies that I have just discussed. Using the frameworks offered by concepts such as (auto)biography, testimony, identity, and trauma,⁵³ these researches deepened the existing understanding of the comic as well as further cemented *Maus* as a canonical text for both the study of the memory of the Holocaust (Geis 6) and that of postmodern historical representation. And while I would not go as far as to argue that discussions of *Maus* after the 1980s only expand on the ideas put forward by the likes of Brown, Hirsch, Witek, Huyssen, and Young, it is difficult to find entirely new discoveries in this once fertile yet now somewhat tired field of study. One road towards innovation that scholars took is through the application of new theoretical frameworks to *Maus*.⁵⁴ At the same time, it is fair to note that, notwithstanding their individual qualities, these studies did not dramatically alter the ways in which *Maus* was read in memory and literary studies. Secondary to this main body of *Maus* publication, and often very close to it in terms of approach, are the articles published in the context of education⁵⁵ and translation studies.⁵⁶ The attention paid to Spiegelman’s comic in these fields—which mostly investigates the

use of *Maus* in classrooms around the globe and the challenges raised by it in terms of translation—demonstrates the extent to which *Maus* has become a household name in academia. A reading of the many academic discussions of *Maus* in the 2000s and 2010s, reveals that the already described positioning of *Maus* in academia alongside memory and literary studies and against history remain virtually unchanged.

***Maus*, Comics Studies, and the Struggle to be Taken Seriously**

The widespread academic discussion of Spiegelman's work propelled *Maus* into canonicity and comics into academia. Through its success as one of the examples of postmodern Holocaust fiction, *Maus* became the best-known comic in academia and came to stand for the medium as a whole—often in its more *salonfähig* rebranding as the graphic novel. One peculiar result of this shift is that the specific characteristics attributed to *Maus* were also more and more associated with the medium of comics as a whole. The overwhelming preference for historical and (auto)biographical comics in the academic study of comics can at least partly be explained through the impact of the success of *Maus* as the first substantial gesture of comics studies.⁵⁷

Maus made comics visible to academia, but only in a particular way. And, subsequently, this particular way of making visible has instilled in the study of comics in academia a number of biases. Initially, however, these biases were not perceived as a pressing issue. More pressing, for scholars more familiar with the comics medium, was the need to counteract the overwhelmingly language or narrative focused approaches of much *Maus* scholarship,⁵⁸ as well as researches that authenticated *Maus* as a unique achievement in the field of comics, thus singling *Maus* out at the cost of the medium as a whole (Wilner 1997, 171). In opposition, investigations of *Maus* more aware of the comics medium and its history discussed the work not as an exception but as a rule for the medium. Comic scholars did so while being attentive enough to note—alongside their oppositions to studies that signaled *Maus* out at the cost of the medium as a whole—that

while *Maus*' treatment of the past was certainly discernable in other historical comic, Spiegelman's approach was neither the only possible nor the only good way to represent the past in comics. Still, any attempt to foster academic attention for comics by showing that *Maus* was a rule more than an exception also inadvertently strengthened the biases already set in place by earlier studies; reducing the broader potential for historical representation in comics to expressions in comics that are, in some way, shape, or form, *Maus*-like.

Gene Kannenberg Jr.'s contribution to the early Anglophone comics studies volume *The Graphic Novel* (2001) is a good example of how comics scholars argued against *Maus* as the exception within the field of comics:⁵⁹

I'm perhaps preaching to the converted here, but my appeal comes from reading a large amount of *Maus* criticism which makes this fundamental error. Those critics who speak of *Maus*' "mice" usually do not have a background in comics criticism, and thus they miss such nods to *Maus*' "comics-ness," its indebtedness to comics conventions. (Kannenberg Jr. 2001, 82)

Without claiming that all historical representation in comics is alike to that of *Maus*, Kannenberg Jr. notes the importance of the cultural context of Spiegelman's work for an academic understanding of it. Implicit to this argument is the idea that *Maus* does not exist in a vacuum but is the product of comics history. This is certainly true. Moreover, it is a point that—after the incorporation of *Maus* in the disciplines of memory and literary studies—needed to be restated. In his subsequent analysis of *Maus*, Kannenberg Jr. investigates the impact of drawing of self-identification in Spiegelman's comic (81). Without making any excessive claims concerning comics proclivity for subjective realism, Kannenberg Jr.'s focus on the subjective

effects of drawing also unintentionally furthers the association of *Maus* with a subjective approach to historical representation. Furthermore, because Kannenberg Jr. stresses the importance of seeing *Maus* within a wider comics tradition, the association of *Maus* with subjectively-based representation bleeds over onto the medium as a whole.

In comparison to Kannenberg Jr., the way in which *Maus*' perceived subjective realism is transported to the medium as a whole becomes more obvious when more overt claims to the importance of *Maus*' comicsness are made. Rocco Versaci, for example, in *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (2007), argues that by combining word and image, comics draw on both documentary photography and written memoir, the two main forms of Holocaust testimony (83). Furthermore, because the medium inherently highlights artificiality (92, 94), the effect of this combination is not only a higher degree of mimesis, but also a continual questioning of the nature of representation (91). There is some truth to all of these statements. The danger in such a conflation of the medium as a whole with *Maus*' particular brand of representation, however, is that while it highlights the capabilities of the medium, it can also obscure the other ways in which comics use the medium's affordances to represent the past.

As the object of study that opened up comics studies to wider readership and funding from other disciplines, *Maus* and academic discussions thereof came to dominate the perception of historical representation in comics. While Versaci might be among the more polemically written examples, even the more nuanced accounts such as Kannenberg Jr., caused a number of the characteristics associated with *Maus* to transfer to the medium of comics as a whole. Much more than the actual arguments of these essays, the combined effect of their dominance in the discourse of comics studies crowded out discussions of comics that might have highlighted different approaches to representing the past.

In the time of its inception with Rodolphe Töpffer, the argument for comics over literature or art was that it provided more direct or intuitive access to experience. The *Maus* event bolstered this perceived strength by highlighting the subjectively focused representation of the past in Spiegelman's comic, and added to it that comics' strength also resided in the way in which the medium, because it was deemed less capable of transparent representation than photography, film, and literature, automatically highlighted the constructedness of all representation. Within the shift caused in comics realism in the broad sense by postmodernity, comics' continual focus on the artificiality of all representation of the past almost became a realistic mode of representation in its own right. The increasingly close connection between the comics medium's affordances and *Maus*' poetics exacerbated the effect of the *Maus* event. To be clear, I do not think that it is in any way a mistake to argue that *Maus* heavily makes use of a kind of subjective realism, certainly its representation of the past is heavily colored by its focus on the subject's point of view. However, as I show below in my discussion of Ole Frahm analysis of *Maus*, focusing only on the subjective realism in *Maus* does obscure the other modes of realism that the comic deploys in its representation of the past.

Extrapolating the perceived poetic characteristics of one comic to the medium as a whole is a recipe for misrepresentation. The extrapolation of *Maus*' poetics to a certain kind of comic, as can be seen in Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, is subtler. In his study, Hatfield places *Maus* within a wider context of direct market comics shops (25), the opportunities offered by industry decline (30), and the creative developments of the American underground comix movement that originated in the counterculture 60s (19). But what Hatfield's analysis also does is further cement the association of the "good," "literary," or "alternative" comic with a postmodern poetics centered around ironic and self-reflexive approaches to autobiography, reportage, and historical fiction (x).

What makes comics alternative comics, besides their specific context of their production and distribution, is a commitment to an ironic, self-reflexive approach to a number of genres. Such distinctions partly on the basis of types of comics result in reproductions of the high/low culture divide within the field of comics, even when the works discussed under the flag of alternative comics often seek to undermine such divisions. These classificatory difficulties generated by the concept of alternative comics, however, do little to disqualify Hatfield's insightful analysis of Spiegelman's comic, of which the main take-away is the term ironic authentication, which is used to characterize *Maus*' blend of irony, self-reflexivity, and its insistence on historical accuracy against better judgement (140).

Hillary Chute's "The Shadow of a Past Time: History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*" (2006) is an example of how it is still possible to make claims concerning medium specificity while, at the same time, refraining from making too sweeping statements that bend the conception of the medium out of shape. The article begins with a claim reminiscent of Kannenberg Jr.'s:

Most readings of how *Maus* represents history approach this issue in terms of ongoing debates about Holocaust representation, in the context of postmodernism, or in relation to theories to traumatic memory. But such readings do not pay much attention to *Maus*'s narrative form: the specificities of reading graphically, of taking individual pages as crucial units of comics grammar. The form of *Maus*, however, is essential to how it represents history. Indeed, *Maus*'s contribution to thinking about the crisis in representation, I will argue, is precisely in how it proposes that the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories (2005, 200).

Chute's focus is on how the form of comics enables a persistence of the past in *Maus* (2005, 200). While Chute does not eschew formal claims concerning comics' capabilities, she never universalizes such claims to the medium as a whole, nor does she place them in relation to perceived strengths and weaknesses of other media. Instead, Chute's more modest claims allow her to refrain from adding to the deformation of the medium caused by the *Maus* event. *Maus*, to Chute, stands at a significant juncture in the history of the medium and shows the possibilities that the medium affords, and that are now furthered in Marjane Satrapi and Joe Sacco's work (2005, 220). For all its innovation in terms of looking at the comics form in relation to the representation of the past, however, Chute's approach keeps close to Young's. Chute, like Young, sees in *Maus* a possibility for historical representation that evades, or at least indicates the problematics of, closure (2005, 214). As such, Chute's text demonstrates how to argue for a greater sensitivity to the medium of comics without externalizing the specifics of *Maus*' representation of the past to the medium as a whole.

In their struggle for the medium of *Maus* to be taken seriously, comics scholars made use of *Maus*' position as a canonical text in memory studies. Acting on an opening caused by the increased attention for the interactions between media and memory within memory studies, these scholars aimed to make the medium visible to Anglophone academia, in which it had, notwithstanding a few exceptions, remained relatively obscure. Arguing against the singularity of *Maus*, scholars inadvertently added to the obscuring effect of the *Maus* event by centering academic discourse on comics around *Maus*. And while this is a danger that is difficultly averted—with this discussion I am bound to do the same—awareness and a better understanding of the effects of the *Maus* event are the only things that will ultimately allow us to see past it.

Moving Past the *Maus* Event

Through my review of the Anglophone discussions of *Maus* in academia, I have attempted to shed some light on the impact of the success of *Maus*. The wider effect of the *Maus* event for comics, I argue, is that it made the medium visible to academia as a subject for memory and literary studies. At the same time, the canonization of *Maus* within these specific fields of study, and the type of attention this caused to be paid to it, limited the attention to comics of a particular kind: that is, comics that are, in one way or another, *Maus*-like. The narrower implication of the *Maus* event for post-*Maus* World War II comics is that the subjective mode of realism came to be seen as the best or even only suitable mode of representing the past in comics. While the subjective mode of realism is incredibly important for the representation of the past in comics, I will not concede that it constitutes the only possible way of representing the past in comics. The privileging of the subjective mode of realism in readings of *Maus* is related to a shift in the perception of realism, where the subjective mode of realism, through the advent of postmodernism and memory studies, started to pose a serious challenge to historiographic and mechanical realism. In this wider struggle, *Maus*, and subsequently comics, were positioned with subjective realism in opposition to historiographic and mechanical realism. This positioning caused the mode of subjective realism to be emphasized in researches of the representation of the past in *Maus* and comics.

Contrary to this singling out of subjective realism, I will argue that the strength of the subjective mode of realism in comics arises precisely from the ways in which it is combined with other modes of realism. And while such a conception of *Maus* can already be found in the analyses of Young, LaCapra, and Rothberg, it shines through most clearly in the work of the German scholar Ole Frahm. His *Genealogie des Holocausts* (2006) differs from most works discussed here because it is a dissertation spanning 244 pages. Unsurprisingly, Frahm can go into much more detail than most articles and is able

to approach Spiegelman's comic from a much wider framework, which encompasses both memory studies and a more comics-minded literary studies analysis.

Central to Frahm's approach is that *Maus* is a comic book example of the genealogical analysis developed initially by Nietzsche and expanded upon by Foucault. The genealogy that Frahm likens *Maus* to is one that is based on meticulous documentation, that is parodic in relation to the realism of traditional history, contests the identity of both the narrative and its narrators, and interrogates the possibility of historical truth (Foucault 1998, 369, 385). Through these contestations, *Maus* lays bare the power relations that shape Holocaust representation (Frahm 2001, 73). For Frahm—and this is where it is most clear that his approach can be read as an extension or deepening of Young and LaCapra's readings of Spiegelman's comic—*Maus* is able to address Holocaust discourse in such a fashion because it creates, page after page, different tensions between the most prominent forms that Holocaust discourse takes in both text and image. To Frahm, *Maus* is (auto)biography, testimony, documentary, history, and comic, and at the same time it is none of these things exclusively (2006, 96). The different juxtapositions between these different identities of *Maus*, instead of one of them, is what makes up any sort of final identity of the work as a genealogy. By applying the *mise en abîme* logic that can be found in *Maus*' use of masks to the comic as a whole, Frahm is able to get past Huyssen's characterization of Spiegelman's comic as deconstructing historical documentation through oral testimony, or LaCapra's identification of *Maus* as an ethnographic depiction of survivor culture (170-173). Instead, Frahm argues, Spiegelman's comic resists being pinned down to such a singular identity. *Maus*' resistance to identification should be read as a reaction to the reduction of a plural structure of identity to that of Jewish, and concomitantly, less-than-human, that was forced upon many during the reign of the Nazi Party (86). By stressing the fluidity of identity, *Maus*' genealogical comics

practice resists the Nazi conception of identity as tied to a singular descent and place.

The truths that can be told about the Holocaust are dependent upon the practices that surround the representational forms in which they are told (97). By showing these different truths and the practices that lead to them in juxtaposition on the comics page, *Maus* does not only destroy the possibility of historical reference in a relativistic sense. It also shows that there are different kinds of truths resulting from different kinds of representing the past. And while that does not suture the rupture that the catastrophic past leaves us with, it offers insight in the different ways of living with it.

If there is any place where the perceived or maybe even self-willed weakness of the comics medium needs to be injected into the discussion of its capability for the representation of the past, it is here. The insecurities caused by the perceived lack of the comics medium add to a more general inadequacy of representation in the face of the catastrophic past. World War II representation in comics is still frequently considered an uphill battle; how does one render such a past in a medium that seems so unsuited to it in terms of the medium's long association with fictional, comical, and/or children's narratives and the perceived inability of the medium to transparently represent the outside world? In reaction to such perceived lacks—which are more a cause of the medium's by now somewhat outdated cultural and historical contexts than of its medium specificity—comics artists, following Spiegelman, often incorporate many different forms of realism in order to authenticate their representation of the past. Furthermore, and this is where comics cultural positioning meets medium affordance, because comics are combinations of images and texts in a deliberate sequence, they are able to juxtapose different modes of realistic representation alongside one another. Through these juxtapositions of different modes of realism in word and image World War II comics express both an obsession with realism and a moral and philosophical denial of the possibility of any kind of absolute realism

in historical representation. In the following chapters, I will analyze post-*Maus* World War II comics in order to demonstrate that what makes them valuable is not that they exemplify one mode of realism, but that they can be read as expressions and interrogations of the war of positions that is realism.