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Comics realism and the Maus event

Comics and the dynamics of World War II remembrance

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Conclusion

The skeletal remains on which *Onward* ends invoke remembrance by threatening oblivion. In this way, Mizuki makes clear his reply to the Adornian prohibition on representation that was so central to early discussions of World War II representation: silence is worse than misrepresentation. Caught between the fear of oblivion and cliché, Mizuki—and with him the other comics artists that I have discussed in this thesis—have chosen to attempt to represent, rather than let the past lie. Moreover, they let their struggles with representing the catastrophic past shimmer through in their representations in various ways. In so doing, they have not only rescued the pasts that they set out to remember from oblivion, but also, and more valuably, they have created an index of the human struggle for representation in the face of the catastrophic past.

Besides showing the importance and inevitability of representation in the wake of the catastrophic past, the comics I analyzed also demonstrate that the affordances of the comics medium for historical representation are much broader than is often assumed. In order to bring into view these affordances, I chose to limit my investigation to World War II comics. Not only did this allow me to include the best-known historical comic—Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*—it also permitted me to test the comics medium at an extreme: the horrors of World War II push all representation to its limits, and it is precisely at these outmost edges that the cracks of representation

become best discernable. In my preliminary exploration of World War II representation in comics and other media, I found that the concept of realism, regardless of the critiques leveled at the concept by postmodern thinkers, continually resurfaces. The more catastrophic a past, the more realism is demanded of representations of it by creators, critics, and audiences—and yet, what is perceived by creators, critics, and audiences as realistic, however, continually shifts.

In this thesis, I therefore analyzed historical representation in comics using a conception of realism that takes into account the fact that what is seen as realistic does not stay the same across audiences and over time. Realism, I argued, alongside the works of Jameson and Gombrich, is not the gradual perfecting of an illusion but a constant struggle between different ways of depicting the world. Realism is thus relative: what is experienced as realistic is always dependent on context. In the specific case of World War II representation in comics, I distinguished three main competing modes of representing the past: the subjective, historiographic and mechanic modes of realism. Reexamining comics with this conception of realism at hand, I found that, in relation to other media, historical representation in comics is seen as especially suited to subjective realism. Looking more closely at World War II representation in comics, however, I discovered that many of them combine different modes of realism in their representations of the past.

In chapter two, “The *Maus* Event,” I traced the roots of the perceived suitability of comics to subjective realism back to the impact of the success of *Maus* on the study of comics in academia. As I demonstrated by way of my reception study, *Maus* came to be seen as an exemplary Holocaust narrative in the 1990s and early 2000s. Besides being published in a particularly receptive context, *Maus* should also be considered a generative work for the, at that time, booming field of memory studies. For scholars studying Holocaust remembrance, *Maus* both bridged the divide between American Holocaust art and European Holocaust art and showed how the past

impacts not only Holocaust survivors, but their children as well. The success of *Maus*, I argued, not only made space for comics in academia, but also caused certain aspects of comics culture and comics' medium affordances to be enlarged at the cost of others. Literary and memory scholars positioned *Maus* in opposition to historiographic accounts of the past by focusing on the uniquely subjective perspective that the comic offered on the past. The persuasiveness of *Maus* working together with shifts in cultural tastes allowed a drawn work based on a family's recollection of the past to be perceived as more realistic than historiographic and/or mechanical accounts.

The rise of the academic study of comics, which is at least partly attributable to *Maus*' success, did not counteract this and at times even exacerbated the strong connection between comics and subjective realism sparked by Spiegelman's success. Arguing against seeing *Maus* as the exception of comics, scholars better versed in comics culture argued that *Maus*' brand of representation was not unique to Spiegelman's comic, thus strengthening the connection between the poetics of *Maus* and the affordances of the medium. In this way, the comics medium became closely associated with a specific subjectively based approach to representing the past. And while the subjective mode of realism is certainly central to many of the medium's most famous historically themed works, the confusion of the particular poetics of *Maus* with the much more general affordances of the medium as a whole have caused a substantial part of comics' abilities to represent the past to be neglected.

As I have argued, the most significant of these abilities is the way in which the comics medium allows creators to combine different ways of portraying the past. What makes historical representation in World War II comics interesting is that, instead of offering purely subjective based representations of the past, they construct it in combinations of different modes for establishing historical realism. Alongside Ole Frahm's study, I discovered that *Maus* too can also be read as combining modes of realism. Rather than framing *Maus*

as proof of comics' proclivity to subjectively based representations of World War II, Frahm's work allowed me to consider *Maus* as a practice-based genealogy that combines different modes of realism in order to explore the possibilities and limits of different ways of bringing the past into the present.

In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I argued this point by showing that post-*Maus* World War II comics are often better characterized as combinations of different approaches to realistic representation. On one page of a World War II comic, for example, it is possible to encounter historiographic third-person narration combined with a drawn point-of-view shot and a photograph. And while in theory combining these different ways of bridging the gap between representation and reality does not always make sense—does the perception of photography as realistic not come with an implicit critique of the realism of drawing?—the comics medium allows various modes of representation to be combined almost seamlessly on the page.

In my first case study, I analyzed how the comics medium enables the co-presentation of different kinds of texts. I did so by way of a close reading of Peter Pontiac's *Kraut*. As the phonetic symmetry between both titles already suggests, *Kraut* was heavily inspired by *Maus*. Like *Maus*, *Kraut* is a son's reconstruction of the father's wartime past. Unlike *Maus*, however, Pontiac's father collaborated with the Nazis as an SS war reporter. What makes Pontiac's comic especially suited to an analysis of how comics can combine different modes of realism in texts is that text is much more prominent in *Kraut* than is the case for most comics. In order to understand *Kraut*'s use of text, moreover, I had to look as much at the visual presentation of texts on the page as at the content of them. Accordingly, my analysis started by focusing on the handwriting that at times seems to dominate the pages of *Kraut*. Even if this handwriting is ultimately printed ink in a mass-produced book, I demonstrated how the author became more present through the visual characteristics of his handwriting.

Besides presence, handwriting connotes intimacy, authenticity, and subjectivity. The presentation of this handwriting in the form of a letter addressed to Pontiac's presumed dead father, furthermore, only serves to further strengthen these connotations.

But *Kraut* does not consist solely of the handwriting of its author. By analyzing how different texts are combined on the pages of *Kraut* I was able to investigate how in comics it is not only the visual characteristics, but also the spatial emplacement of the texts that impact its representation of the past. On the pages where Pontiac represents his fathers' experiences as an SS war reporter in wartime Europe, he incorporates a wide range of different texts. On these pages, handwriting, typeset court documents, and digitally printed text exist side-by-side on the page. By analyzing both the visual characteristics of these texts and their placement on the page, I demonstrated how the different texts out of which *Kraut* is made up engage with one another. At times, these texts support one another's depictions of the past, thus doubly authenticating it. More often, however, they contrast one another. *Kraut* thus makes use of the ability of the comics medium to juxtapose different texts on the page in order to present the past in a distinctly polyphonic manner.

Besides as a narrative, *Kraut* can thus also be read as a collection of texts about a certain past. *Kraut's* archival form allows its more personal accounts of the past to be subsumed in the historiographic realism of the archive. At the same time, however, I established that the strength of both the father's eyewitness account as well as Pontiac's handwritten discourse is never completely subsumed into the archival form. Rather, both modes of representing the past—the subjective and the historiographic—exist side-by-side in *Kraut*. By having both registers at his disposal in his representation of his father's life and death, Pontiac is able to resist the traps of either writing an apology for his father, or an all-too-easy moralistic refutation of him. Instead, by continually staging a formal conflict between two modes of realism, Pontiac is able to represent the problematic past of Dutch

collaboration during World War II as an ongoing conflict. Because he does so, Pontiac does not only find a way to contribute to the Dutch World War II remembrance culture in an innovative way, he has also created an account of the past that can be read as an exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of different kinds of texts for historical representation.

The comic central to my second case study, *Magneto: Testament*, is as far removed from *Maus* as *Kraut* is close to it. Both *Maus* and *Kraut*, however successful, were initially conceived as single-author, small-press alternative comics treatments of World War II. *Magneto: Testament*, contrarily, is a Marvel Comics superhero origin story that takes its supervillain protagonist from the Warsaw ghetto to Auschwitz. The large distance between what is commonly considered a realistic and respectful depiction of the Holocaust and superhero comics poses as a considerable challenge to the creators of *Magneto: Testament*. Precisely the fact that this comic needs to span such a substantial divide, however, is what makes Pak and Di Giandomenico's comic a worthwhile object for analysis. In my close reading of the comic, I investigated how Pak and Di Giandomenico make use of the comics medium's ability to combine modes of realism in order to meet this challenge.

One thing that immediately strikes the initiated superhero comics reader is the complete absence of superpowers in *Magneto: Testament*. My analysis of Pak and Di Giandomenico's comic, moreover, showed how it either tones down or completely omits elements—both pictorial and textual—that might evoke the comics medium. Besides the fact that superpowers are absent, I demonstrated that Di Giandomenico's drawing style eschews caricature and all-too-dramatic visual gestures, its use of onomatopoeia is modest, and its page compositions lack the more outward dramatics of most superhero comics. In place of these hallmark features of superhero comics, *Magneto: Testament* incorporates photography, historical blockbuster film, historiography, and eyewitness testimony—

mostly foreign elements to superhero comics—and never challenges their representative abilities. In this sense, *Magneto: Testament*'s representation of the past differs significantly from that of the other comics that I analyzed in this thesis. Rather than problematizing representation, *Magneto: Testament* hides that it is a representation. The transparency for which its creators aim, however, is also thwarted by its deployment of different modes of realism. In other words, while Pak and Di Giandomenico highlight comics' ability to combine a wide range of different ways of representing the past in text and image, their use of them not only authenticates their representation, it also inadvertently draws attention to the medium in which the past is presented. Here, the completely blacked-out panels on page sixteen and seventeen of issue four spring to mind (see fig. 34). On the one hand, this blacking-out can be read as an attempt to tone down the visuality of the comics medium in order to strengthen the impact of Max Eisenhardt's testimony. On the other, however, this black spread is also spectacularly visual in its denial of the image. Besides drawing attention to the testimony, these pages also draw attention to the fact that this testimony is mediated to the reader in a comic book.

It is thus somewhat doubtful whether *Magneto: Testament* really succeeds in its aims to transparently represent the past. For those who do not see the illusions of the different modes of representation on which its transparent representation of the past is built, *Magneto: Testament* can be a worthwhile and reasonably well-researched introduction to a topic that continues to be in need of remembrance. Ultimately, however, I consider *Magneto: Testament*'s attempt to portray the past transparently to be a step in the wrong direction. It neither embraces the fact that it is a comic book—like *Maus*—nor does it place the different modes of realism that it incorporates in contrasts that draw out their incompatibility, strengths, and weaknesses—as is the case in *Kraut*. Because of this, it ends up lending credence to the view that comics are not capable of or adequate for World War II representation.

In the final case study of this thesis, I examined Mizuki's use of different graphic styles in his depiction of the suffering of Japanese Imperial Army soldiers in *Onward*. In this Japanese comic, Mizuki portrays a fictionalized depiction of his own experiences in a wide range of different graphic styles and, in doing so, allows for an investigation of "the content of the form" of comics.¹²³ Rather than hiding the fact that it is a comic book, Mizuki continually draws contrasts between what is commonly perceived as a comics drawing style—cartoony or schematic drawing—and a more photo realistic way of depicting the past. In its many schematic renditions of soldiers, *Onward* emphasizes the subjective experiences of these men. Here, the long-standing connotation of drawing with subjectivity—a connotation that is only strengthened by the schematic drawings that are most commonly associated with comics—humanizes the Japanese soldiers that are rendered in this style. Often in *Onward*, these schematically drawn soldiers are pictured in landscapes drawn in a near-photorealist style. In this way, Mizuki shows that comics are perfectly capable of representations of the past in more than just the subjective mode of realism.

Onward thus embeds the conflict between the schematically drawn soldiers and their paradisiacal, yet deadly, surroundings in a struggle between ways of seeing the world. The same occurs when the soldiers are subjected to mechanical warfare. Mizuki uses the struggle between mechanical realism in near-photorealist drawings and subjective realism in schematic drawings to allow multiple perspectives on the past to coexist in his telling of it. Moreover, whenever the juxtapositions between different ways of seeing the world are in danger of becoming too simplistic—as is the case when mechanically realist images clash with subjective realist ones to suggest that war only ever happens to the individual and is never perpetrated by him—Mizuki overturns such easy dichotomies by purposely shifting what the different styles signify or by blending them together. As the Japanese soldiers prepare for a suicide attack,

for example, they are no longer solely depicted in the schematic style (see fig. 55). In my analysis, I demonstrated how something similar happens near the very end of the work, where Mizuki confronts his own survival by killing off the character that most resembles him. Here, Mizuki blends the different styles he used throughout *Onward* in order to probe the limits of pictorial representation. In face of the terrible effects of mechanized warfare, what difference is there between a photograph and a drawing? And which of these is better suited to render the horribly mangled corpses of the dead? For Mizuki, neither a representation of first-hand experience, the renderings of machines, nor historiography can truly do justice to the past.

Silence is, as I mentioned above, an even worse option for Mizuki. Throughout his long career—just like he keeps coming back to past in different styles in *Onward*—Mizuki kept returning to his wartime experiences in different comics genres. But it is in the moments of *Onward* where the past is not depicted in one, but in an unstable mixture of graphic styles that he succeeds in bringing both the folly of and the desire for realism into view most aptly. These moments show that all modes of realism are, in the end, inadequate in the face of the catastrophic past. What they also show, however, is how we cannot stop aiming for a realistic depiction of the past, even if these attempts seem to tear the very logic of representation to shreds.

Each of the comics that I have studied in this thesis is an expression—in one way or another—of the desire for some kind of contact with the reality of the past as well as representation's inability to truly reach it. In their grasping at the past, the comics that I researched in this thesis show that the comics medium's affordances for historical representation far exceed the dominant view of it as especially—or only—suited to subjective realism. *Kraut*, *Magneto: Testament*, and *Onward* do not narrow their view in order to make the past more easily intelligible. Instead, they use the full range of

comics' medial affordances to draw and write their pasts in densely layered combinations of the subjective, historiographic, and mechanic modes. In my analysis, I have attempted to unpack these polyphonic renditions of the past in order to demonstrate their substantial contributions to World War II memory culture.

Besides showing that World War II comics' contributions to memory culture are richer than is often thought, I have also read comics as reflections of the impact of an ever-widening media landscape on the dynamics of World War II remembrance. Here, a degree of caution is appropriate: comics are not perfect reflections of broader World War II memory culture. Still, by investigating these comics, I was able to gain some insights into what can happen when different ways of representing the past coexist in memory culture. The first of these insight concerns the ease with which creators combine and audiences read representations of the past that consist of different modes of realism. On almost all their pages, the comics that I studied almost seamlessly combine ways of portraying the past that are based on completely contrary approaches to historical representation. By showing the effortlessness with which different ways of representing the past can coexist, World War II comics offer further proof of how cultural memory does not consist of one hegemonic narrative of the past told in texts by historiographers, but how it comes into being out of the combinations of a host of different ways of rendering it in a wide range of different media. Moreover, these comics, by playing with the expectations of their readers concerning the kinds of pasts that are told in a particular mode, demonstrate how accustomed audiences have become to reading vastly differing representations of the past alongside and intertwined with one another.

The second insight stems from my analysis of *Magneto: Testament*. In that chapter, I concluded that by combining different modes of realism, World War II comics not only authenticate their representations of the past, they also cause—at the very least—a heightened awareness of representation itself. That is, the World

CONCLUSION

War II comics that I studied make their readers aware of the fact that they are dealing with a representation rather than with the past itself. *Kraut* and *Onward*, moreover, purposefully combine different modes of realism in order to interrogate the strengths and limits of modes of representation that they employ. By combining different ways of portraying the past, World War II comics thus demonstrate that there is no such thing as a representation that offers a completely transparent view of the past. Instead, these comics show that when we set out to rescue the past from oblivion, we find representation.

It would be wrong, however, to lament the inability of representation to completely capture the past. The loss of a unified historical narrative, World War II comics show, is only the shattering of a once convincing mode of realism. The coexistence of multiple ways of rendering the past does not result in memory becoming impure, or in forgetting. Rather, the presence of different conceptions and ways of rendering the past guards against the dangers of all-too convincingly reducing the overabundance of the past into a single story.