

*Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno*¹

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I resist becoming the Elie Wiesel of
the comic book.

— Art Spiegelman

Since the 1980s, the question is no longer *whether*, but rather *how* to represent the Holocaust in literature, film, and the visual arts. The earlier conviction about the essential unrepresentability of the Holocaust, typically grounded in Adorno's famous statement about the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz and still powerful in some circles today, has lost much of its persuasiveness for later generations who only know of the Holocaust through representations: photographs and films, documentaries, testimonies, historiography and fiction. Given the flood of Holocaust representations in all manner of media today, it would indeed be sheer voluntarism to stick with Adorno's notion of a ban on images which translates a theological concept into a very specific kind of modernist aesthetic. It seems much more promising to approach the issue of Holocaust representations through another concept that holds a key place in Adorno's thought, that of mimesis.

In his recently published book, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment*,² Anson Rabinbach persuasively shows how Adorno's understanding of Nazi

1. An earlier German version of this essay was published in Manuel Köppen and Klaus R. Scherpe, eds., *Bilder des Holocaust* (Böhlau: Cologne, 1997) 171-90.

2. Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).

anti-Semitism is energized by his theory of mimesis.³ More importantly, however, he links Adorno's discussion of the role of mimesis in anti-Semitism to Horkheimer's and Adorno's historical and philosophical reflections on mimesis as part of the evolution of signifying systems, as they are elaborated in the first chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁴ Here Horkheimer and Adorno discuss mimesis in its true and repressed forms, its role in the process of civilization and its paradoxical relationship to the *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition of graven images.⁵ At the same time, the concept of mimesis in Adorno (and I take it that Adorno rather than Horkheimer is the driving force in articulating this concept in the co-authored work), is not easily defined, as several recent studies have shown.⁶ Rather it functions more like a palimpsest, in that it partakes in at least five different yet overlapping discursive registers in the text: first in relation to the critique of the commodity form and its powers of reification and deception, a thoroughly negative form of mimesis [*Mimesis ans Verhärtete*]; secondly in relation to the anthropological grounding of human nature which, as Adorno insists in *Minima Moralia*, is "indissolubly linked to imitation"⁷; third in a biological somatic sense geared toward survival as Adorno had encountered it in Roger Caillois's work, some of which he reviewed for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*,⁸ fourth in the Freudian

3. Central here is the chapter entitled "Elements of Anti-Semitism" in Horkheimer and Adorno's classic work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1947], trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1982).

4. As is to be expected, the discussion of signification, hieroglyphs, language and image is pre-Saussurean, pre-semiotic in the strict sense. It remains indebted to Benjamin on the one hand, and through Benjamin also to a nineteenth-century tradition of German language philosophy. But it is precisely the non-Saussurean nature of this thought that allows the notion of mimesis to emerge in powerful ways.

5. See Gertrud Koch, "Mimesis und Bilderverbot in Adorno's Ästhetik," *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

6. See Josef Früchtel, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986); Karla L. Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno's Concept of Imitation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990); Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Kultur, Kunst, Gesellschaft* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), esp. 374-422; Martin Jay, "Mimesis and Mimatology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe," *Cultural Semantics* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998) 120-37.

7. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974) 154.

8. Adorno, Review of Roger Caillois, *La Mante religieuse*, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7 (1938): 410-11. See also Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 22 Sept. 1937 and Benjamin's response in his letter of 2 Oct. 1937 in *Theodor W. Adorno-Walter Benjamin: Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1994) 276-78, 286.

sense of identification and projection indebted to *Totem and Taboo*; and, lastly, in an aesthetic sense that resonates strongly with Benjamin's language theory, as it relates to the role of word and image in the evolution of signifying systems. It is precisely this multivalence of mimesis, I would argue, that makes the concept productive for contemporary debates about memory, trauma, and representation in the public realm. Thus it is more than a mere paradox that mimesis serves Adorno to explain Nazi anti-Semitism, whereas it serves me to understand the ethics and aesthetics of approaching Holocaust memory in our time.

In this essay, I will focus on one specific aspect of memory discourse, namely the vexing issue of (in Timothy Garton Ash's succinct words) if, how, and when to represent historical trauma.⁹ The historical trauma to be represented is the Holocaust, a topic on which, as already indicated, Adorno had provocative things to say, although he never said quite enough about it. But I do think that the issues raised in this essay pertain as much to other instances of historical trauma and their representation: whether we think of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, Guatemala, or Chile, the stolen generation in Australia, or the post-apartheid debates in South Africa – in all these cases issues of how to document, how to represent, and how to view and listen to testimony about a traumatic past have powerfully emerged in the public domain.

I hope to show that a reading through mimesis of one specific Holocaust image-text may allow us to go beyond arguments focusing primarily on the rather confining issue of how to represent the Holocaust "properly" or how to avoid aestheticizing it. My argument will be based on the reading of a work that has shocked many precisely because it seems to violate the *Bilderverbot* in the most egregious ways, but that has also been celebrated, at least by some, as one of the most challenging in an ever-widening body of recent works concerned with the Holocaust and its remembrance. But more is at stake here than just the reading of one work through the conceptual screen of another. A discussion of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in terms of the mimetic dimension may get us beyond a certain kind of stalemate in debates about representations of the Holocaust, a stalemate which,

9. The literature on representing the Holocaust is by now legion. One of the richest and still influential collections of essays is Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992). See also, most recently, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1998).

ironically, rests on presuppositions that were first and powerfully articulated by Adorno himself in a different context and at a different time.¹⁰ Reading *Maus* through the conceptual screen of mimesis will permit us to read Adorno against one of the most lingering effects of his work on contemporary culture, the thesis about the culture industry and its irredeemable link to deception, manipulation, domination, and the destruction of subjectivity. While this kind of uncompromising critique of consumer culture, linked as it is to a certain, now historical type of modernist aesthetic practice, resonates strongly with a whole set of situationist and post-structuralist positions developed in France in the 1960s (Barthes, Debord, Baudrillard, Lyotard, *Tel Quel*), it has generally been on the wane in contemporary aesthetic practices. For obvious reasons, however, it has proven to have significant staying power in one particular area: that of Holocaust representations where Adorno's statements about poetry after Auschwitz (often misquoted, unanalyzed and ripped out of their historical context¹¹) have become a standard reference point and have fed into the recent revival of notions of an aesthetic sublime and its dogmatic anti-representational

10. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale and Here my Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1991). Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text as *I* and *II*. The following publications were extremely helpful in preparing this essay. I acknowledge them summarily since my concern is a theoretical proposition rather than a new and differentiated reading of the text per se. Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1989); Andrea Liss, "Trespassing Through Shadows. History, Mourning, and Photography in Representations of Holocaust Memory," *Framework* 4.1 (1991): 29-41; Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures. *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15:2 (Winter 1992-93): 3-29, reprinted in Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997); Miles Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically. *Krazy Kat*, *Maus*, and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon," *American Literary History* 4.1 (Spring 1992): 110-28; Rick Iadonisi, "Bleeding History and Owning His [Father's] Story: *Maus* and Collaborative Autobiography," *CEA Critic: An Official Journal of the College English Association* 57.1 (Fall 1994): 41-55; Michael Rothberg, "We Were Talking Jewish." Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production," *Contemporary Literature* 35.4 (Winter 1994): 661-87; Edward A. Shannon, "'It's No More to Speak'. Genre, the Insufficiency of Language, and the Improbability of Definition in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *The Mid-Atlantic Almanach* 4 (1995): 4-17; Alison Landsberg, "Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique* 71 (Spring/Summer 1997): 63-86. And most recently Dominick LaCapra, "'Twas Night before Christmas: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *History and Memory after Auschwitz*; James Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History," *Critical Inquiry* 24.3 (Spring 1998): 666-99.

11. For a discussion of the worst offenders see Michael Rothberg, "After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe," *New German Critique* 72 (Fall 1997): 45-82.

stance.¹² But this is where the issue of public memory emerges. Although there is widespread agreement that, politically, the genocide of the Jews is to be remembered (with allegedly salutary effects on the present and the future) by as large a public as possible, mass cultural representations are not considered proper or correct. The paradigmatic case exemplifying this broad, though now perhaps fraying, consensus is the debate over Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. Spielberg's film, playing to mass audiences, fails to remember properly because it represents, thus fostering forgetting: Hollywood as fictional substitute for "real history." Lanzmann's refusal to represent, on the other hand, is said to embody memory in the proper way precisely because it avoids the delusions of a presence of that which is to be remembered. Lanzmann's film is praised as a heroic effort in the *Kulturkampf* against the memory industry, and its refusal to re-present, its adherence to the *Bilderverbot* becomes the ground for its authenticity.¹³ Aesthetically speaking, these opposing validations of Spielberg and Lanzmann still rest on the unquestioned modernist dichotomy that pits Hollywood and mass culture against forms of high art.¹⁴ Looking at Spiegelman's *Maus* through the various discursive screens of mimesis, I want to argue, may allow us to approach Holocaust memory and its representations today in a way different from this earlier dominant paradigm.

12. The paradox is that when Adorno accused poetry after Auschwitz of barbarism, he deeply suspected the apologetic temptation of a poetic and aesthetic tradition, whereas much of the recent poststructuralist discourse of the sublime in relation to Holocaust representations does exactly what Adorno feared: it pulls the genocide into the realm of epistemology and aesthetics, instrumentalizing it for a late modernist aesthetic of non-representability. A very good documentation and discussion of notions of the sublime can be found in Christine Pries, ed., *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn* (Weinheim: VCH Acta Humaniora, 1989).

13. Paradigmatically in Shoshana Felman's much discussed essay "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," in Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 204-83. For a convincing critique of Felman's work see LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1994) as well as LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. The latter volume also contains a well-documented essay on Spiegelman's *Maus* that includes a critical discussion of much of the literature on this work.

14. This argument has been made very forcefully and persuasively in Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 292-312. For the earlier debate on the television series *Holocaust*, a similar argument can be found in Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification: *Holocaust* and West German Drama," *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 94-114.

Maus undercuts this dichotomy in the first rather obvious sense that Spiegelman draws on the comic as a mass cultural genre, but transforms it in a narrative saturated with modernist techniques of self-reflexivity, self-irony, ruptures in narrative time and highly complex image sequencing and montaging. As a comic, *Maus* resonates less with Disney productions than with a whole tradition of popular animal fables from Aesop to LaFontaine and even Kafka. At the same time, it evolved of course from an American comic book counter-tradition born in the 1960s that includes works such as *Krazy Kat*, *Fritz the Cat*, and others. At the same time, *Maus* remains different from the older tradition of the enlightening animal fable. If the animal fable (taking George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as a twentieth-century example) had enlightenment as its purpose either through satire or moral instruction, *Maus* remains thoroughly ambiguous, if not opaque, as to the possible success of such enlightenment. Rather than providing us with an enlightened moral or with a happy reconciliation between high and low, human and animal, trauma and memory, the aesthetic and emotional effect of *Maus* remains jarring throughout. This jarring, irritating effect on the reader results from a variety of pictorial and verbal strategies that have their common vanishing point in mimesis, both in its insidious and in its salutary aspects which, as Adorno would have it, can never be entirely separated from each other.

Let me turn now to some of the dimensions of mimesis in this image-text. *Maus* as narrative is based on interviews Art Spiegelman conducted with his father Vladek, an Auschwitz survivor, in the 1970s. Spiegelman taped these interviews in Rego Park, Queens, in his childhood home, and during a summer vacation in the Catskills. The subject of these interviews is the story of Spiegelman's parents' life in Poland in the years 1933 to 1944, but the telling of this traumatic past, as retold in the comic, is interrupted time and again by banal everyday events in the New York present. This cross-cutting of past and present, by which the frame keeps intruding into the narrative, allows Spiegelman, as it were, to have it both ways. For Vladek, it seems to establish a safe distance between the two temporal levels; the tale of his past is visually framed by Spiegelman as if it were a movie projected by Vladek himself. As Vladek begins to tell his story, pedaling on his exercise bicycle, he says proudly: "People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino" (I 13). Behind him in the frame is a large poster of Valentino's 1921 film *The Sheik*, with the main actor as a mouse holding a

swooning lady in his arms. The exercise bicycle mechanism looks remotely like a movie projector, with the spinning wheel resembling a film reel and Vladek as narrator using it to project his story. But this cross-cutting of past and present points in a variety of ways to how this past holds the present captive, independently of whether this knotting of past into present is being talked about or repressed. Thus one page earlier Art, who is sitting in the background and has just asked Vladek to tell him the story of his life in Poland before and during the war, is darkly framed within the frame by the actor's arms and the bicycle's handlebars in the foreground. Vladek's arms, head, and shirt with rolled up sleeves are all striped, and the Auschwitz number tattooed onto his left arm hovers ominously just above Art's head in the frame (*I* 12). Both the narrator (Art Spiegelman) and the reader see Vladek's everyday behavior permeated by his past experiences of persecution during the Nazi period. This first narrative framing is then itself split in two. In addition to the narrative frame the interviews provide, there is yet another level of narrative time that shows the author Art Spiegelman, or rather the *Kunstfigur* Artie, during his work on the book in the years 1978 to 1991, years during which Vladek Spiegelman died and the first part of *Maus* became a great success – all of which is in turn incorporated into the narrative of the second volume. But the complexity of the narration is not just an aesthetic device employed for its own sake. It rather results from the desire of members of the second generation to learn about their parents' past of which they are always, willingly or not, already a part: it is a project of mimetically approximating historical and personal trauma in which the various temporal levels are knotted together in such a way that any talk about a past that refuses to pass away or that should not be permitted to pass, as discussed in the German *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s, seems beside the point.¹⁵ The survivors' son's life stands in a mimetic affinity to his parents' trauma long before he ever embarks on his interviews with his father.¹⁶ Therefore this mimetic relationship can not be thought of simply as a

15. These were central topoi in the German debate about Holocaust memory. See the special issue on the *Historikerstreit*, *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988) as well as Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988).

16. Cf. the two-page prologue initiating volume I dated Rego Park, N.Y. c. 1958 when Art is only 10 years old or the photograph of his dead brother Richieu that overshadowed his childhood, but is later used at the beginning of volume II to dedicate this part of the work to Richieu and to Nadja, Art Spiegelman's daughter.

rational and fully articulated working through.¹⁷ There are dimensions to mimesis that lie outside linguistic communication and that are locked in silences, repressions, gestures, and habits – all produced by a past that weighs all the more heavily as it is not (yet) articulated. Mimesis in its physiological, somatic dimension is *Angleichung*, a becoming or making similar, a movement toward, never a reaching of a goal. It is not identity, nor can it be reduced to compassion or empathy. It rather requires of us to think identity and non-identity together as non-identical similitude and in unresolvable tension with each other.

Maus performs precisely such a mimetic approximation. Spiegelman's initial impetus for conducting these interviews with his father came itself out of a traumatic experience: the suicide of his mother Anja in 1968, an event Spiegelman made into a four page image text originally published in 1973 in an obscure underground comic under the title "Prisoner of the Hell Planet." It is only in the latter half of the first part of *Maus* that Artie suddenly and unexpectedly comes across a copy of this earlier, now almost forgotten attempt to put part of his own life's story into the comics. *Maus* then reproduces the "Prisoner of the Hell Planet" in toto (*I* 100-03). These four pages, all framed in black like an obituary in German newspapers, intrude violently into the mouse narrative, breaking the frame in three significant ways. First, in this earlier work, the figures of Vladek and Artie mourning the death of Anja are drawn as humans, a fact that goes surprisingly unremarked by the mice Artie and Vladek as they are looking at these pages in the narrative of the later work. The identity of the non-identical seems to be taken for granted in this porousness between human and animal realm. Secondly, the comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" opens with a family photo that shows a ten-year old Art in 1958 with his mother during a summer vacation in the Catskills.¹⁸

17. The category of working through has been most thoroughly explored for this context by LaCapra in *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. LaCapra bases his approach on Freud, and he acknowledges that there cannot be a rigorous and strict separation between acting out and working through for trauma victims. While I feel certain affinities to LaCapra's general approach, I prefer not to engage the psychoanalytic vocabulary. While the psychoanalytic approach is certainly pertinent to the analysis of survivor trauma, it does have serious limitations when it comes to artistic representations of the Holocaust and their effect on public memory. The notion of "mimetic approximation" which I try to develop through my reading of *Maus* tries to account for that difference.

18. Significantly, the prologue to volume I that shows Artie roller-skating and hurting himself is also dated 1958, and when just a few pages and many years later Artie asks his father to tell his life's story, he is looking at a picture of his mother saying: "I want to hear it. Start with Mom . . ." (*I* 12).

It is the first of three family photos montaged into the comic, all of which function not in order to document, but in order to stress the unassimilability of traumatic memory.¹⁹ Thirdly, "Prisoner" articulates an extreme moment of unadulterated despair that disrupts the "normal" frame of the interviewing process, the questioning and answering, bickering and fighting between father and son. These pages give testimony of the emotional breakdown of both father and son at Anja's burial: in Art's case, it is overlaid by a kind of survivor guilt of the second degree, once removed from the original trauma of his parents. The memories of Auschwitz do not only claim Anja; they also envelop the son born years after the war. Thus Art draws himself throughout this episode in striped Auschwitz prisoner garb which gives a surreal quality to these starkly executed, woodcut-like, grotesque images. In this moment of secondary Holocaust trauma Spiegelman performs a kind of spatial mimesis of death in the sense of Roger Caillois's work of the 1930s which Adorno read and commented on critically in his correspondence with Benjamin.²⁰ Spiegelman performs a compulsive imaginary mimesis of Auschwitz as a space of imprisonment and murder, a mimesis, however, in which the victim, the mother, becomes perpetrator while the real perpetrators have vanished. Thus at the end of this raw and paralyzing passage, Art, incarcerated behind imaginary bars, reproaches his mother for having committed the perfect crime: "You put me here . . .shorted all my circuits . . . cut my nerve endings . . .and crossed my wires! . . .//You MURDERED me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (I 103). The drawings are expressionist, the text crude though in a certain sense "authentic", but it is easy to see that Spiegelman's comic would have turned into disaster had he chosen the image and language mode of "Prisoner" for the later work. It could only have turned into psycho-comikitsch. Spiegelman did need a different, more estranging mode of narrative and figurative representation in order to overcome the paralyzing effects of a mimesis of memory-terror. He needed a pictorial strategy that would maintain the tension between the overwhelming reality of the remembered events and

19. With this insight and so much more, my reading of *Maus* is indebted to Marianne Hirsch's incisive essay "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory." See also Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover & London: UP of New England, 1999) 3-23.

20. See note 8.

the tenuous, always elusive status of memory itself. As an insert in *Maus*, however, these pages function as a reminder of the representational difficulties of telling a Holocaust or post-Holocaust story in the form of the comic. But they also powerfully support Spiegelman's strategy of using animal imagery in the later, longer work. The choice of medium, the animal comic, is thus self-consciously enacted and justified in the narrative itself. Drawing the story of his parents and the Holocaust as an animal comic is the Odyssean cunning that allows Spiegelman to escape from the terror of memory – even “postmemory” in Marianne Hirsch's terms – while mimetically reenacting it.

But the question lingers: what do we make of the linguistic and pictorial punning of *Maus*, Mauschwitz and the Catskills in relation to mimesis? The decision to tell the story of Germans and Jews as a story of cats and mice as predators and prey should not be misread as a naturalization of history, as some have done. Spiegelman is not the Goldhagen of the comic book. After all, the comic does not pretend to be history. Another objection might be more serious: Spiegelman's image strategies problematically reproduce the Nazi image of the Jew as vermin, as rodent, as mouse. But is it simply a mimicry of racist imagery? And even if it is mimicry, does mimicry of racism invariably imply its reproduction or can such mimicry itself open up a gap, a difference that depends on who performs the miming and how? Mimesis, after all, is based on similitude as making similar (*Angleichung* in Adorno's terminology), the production of “the same but not quite,” as Homi Bhabha describes it in another context.²¹ And *Angleichung* implies difference. Thus Spiegelman himself draws the reader's attention to his conscious mimetic adoption of this imagery. The very top of the copyright page of *Maus I* features a quote from Hitler: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human.” And in *Maus II*, the page following the copyright page begins with a motto taken from a Pommeranian newspaper article from the mid-1930s: “Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!” *Maus*

21. See Homi K. Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse,” *The Location of Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994) 86.

thus gives copyright where it is due: Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

But that may still not be enough of an answer to the objection. More crucial is the way in which the mimesis of anti-Semitic imagery is handled. Here it would be enough to compare Spiegelman's work with the 1940 Nazi propaganda movie *The Eternal Jew*, which portrayed the Jewish world conspiracy as the invasive migration of plague-carrying herds of rodents who destroy everything in their path. Such a comparison makes it clear how Spiegelman's mimetic adoption of Nazi imagery actually succeeds in reversing its implications while simultaneously keeping us aware of the humiliation and degradation of that imagery's original intention. Instead of the literal representation of destructive vermin we see persecuted little animals drawn with a human body and wearing human clothes and with a highly abstracted, non-expressive mouse physiognomy. "Maus" here means vulnerability, unalloyed suffering, victimization. As in the case of the "Prisoner of the Hell Planet," here, too, an earlier much more naturalistic version of the mouse drawings shows how far Spiegelman has come in his attempt to transform the anti-Semitic stereotype for his purposes by eliminating any all-too-naturalistic elements from his drawings.

Defenders of *Maus* have often justified the use of animal imagery as a necessary distancing device, a kind of Brechtian estrangement effect. Spiegelman's own justification is more complex:

First of all, I've never been through anything like that – knock on whatever is around to knock on – and it would be a counterfeit to try to pretend that the drawings are representations of something that's actually happening. I don't know exactly what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few scores of photographs and a couple of movies. I'm bound to do something inauthentic. Also, I'm afraid that if I did it with people, it would be very corny. It would come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or "Remember the Six Million," and that wasn't my point exactly, either. To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it's really a much more direct way of dealing with the material.²²

It is an estrangement effect in the service of mimetic approximation, and thus rather un-Brechtian, for at least in his theoretical reflections, Brecht

22. Interview conducted by Gary Groth, "Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly," Gary Groth and Robert Fiore, eds., *The New Comics* (New York: A Berkley Book, 1988) 190-91.

would not allow for any mimetic impulse in reception. Spiegelman accepts that the past is visually inaccessible through realistic representation: whatever strategy he might chose, it is bound to be “inauthentic.” He also is aware of his generational positioning as someone who knows of this past mainly through media representations. Documentary *authenticity* of representation can therefore not be his goal, but *authentication* through the interviews with his father is. The use of mice and cats is thus not simply an avantgardist distancing device in order to give the reader a fresh, critical, perhaps even “transgressive” view of the Holocaust intended to attack the various pieties and official memorializations that have covered it discursively. Of course, Spiegelman is very aware of the dangers of using Holocaust memory as screen memory for various political purposes in the present. His narrative and pictorial strategy is precisely devised to avoid that danger. It is actually a strategy of another kind of mimetic approximation: getting past the cipher to the people and their experience. But before getting past the cipher, Spiegelman has to put himself into that very system of ciphering: as Artie in the comic, he himself becomes mouse, imitates the physiognomic reduction of his parents by racist stereotype – the post-Auschwitz Jew still as mouse – even though he is now in the country of the dogs (America) rather than the cats. Paradoxically, we have here a mimetic approximation of the past that respects the *Bilderverbot* not despite, but rather because of its use of animal imagery, which tellingly avoids the representation of the human face. *Bilderverbot* and mimesis are no longer irreconcilable opposites, but enter into a complex relationship in which the image is precisely not mere mirroring, ideological duplication or partisan reproduction,²³ but where it approaches writing. This Adornean notion of image becoming script was first elaborated by Miriam Hansen and Gertrud Koch in their attempts to make Adorno pertinent for film theory.²⁴ But it works for Spiegelman’s *Maus* as well. As its image track indeed becomes script, *Maus* acknowledges the inescapable inauthenticity of Holocaust representations in the “realistic” mode, but it achieves a new and unique form of authentication and effect on the reader precisely

23. These are the terms Adorno uses in the first chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where they discuss the irremediable splitting of linguistic sign and image. Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 17-18.

24. Miriam Hansen, “Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kra-cauer,” *New German Critique* 56 (Spring/Summer 1992): 43-75. Koch, “Mimesis and Bilderverbot in Adorno’s Ästhetik.”

by way of its complex layering of historical facts, their oral retelling, and their transformation into image-text. Indeed, it is as animal comic that *Maus*, to quote a typically Adornean turn of phrase from the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “preserves the legitimacy of the image [. . .] in the faithful pursuit of its prohibition.”²⁵

If this seems too strong a claim, consider the notion of image becoming script in *Maus* from another angle. Again, Spiegelman himself is a good witness for what is at stake: “I didn’t want people to get too interested in the drawings. I wanted them to be there, but the story operates somewhere else. It operates somewhere between the words and the idea that’s in the pictures and in the movement between the pictures, which is the essence of what happens in a comic. So by not focusing you too hard on these people you’re forced back into your role as reader rather than looker.”²⁶ And in a radio interview of 1992, he put it even more succinctly by saying that *Maus* is “a comic book driven by the word.”²⁷

I cannot hope to give a full sense of how the linguistic dimension of *Maus* drives the image sequences. A few comments will have to suffice. Central here is the rendering of Vladek’s language taken from the taped interviews. The estranging visualization of the animal comic is counterpointed by documentary accuracy in the use of Vladek’s language. The gestus of Vladek’s speech, not easily forgotten by any reader with an open ear, is shaped by cadences, syntax, and intonations of his East European background. His English is suffused by the structures of Yiddish. Residues of a lost world are inscribed into the language of the survivor immigrant. It is this literally – rather than poetically or mystically – broken speech that carries the burden of authenticating that which is being remembered or narrated. On the other hand, Vladek himself is aware of the problematic nature of any Holocaust remembrance even in language when he says: “It’s no more to speak” (*II* 113). Spiegelman’s complex arrangement of temporal levels finds its parallel in an equally complex differentiation of linguistic registers. Thus the inside narration about the years in Poland as told by Vladek are rendered in fluent

25. Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 24. The original German reads: “Gerettet wird das Recht des Bildes in der treuen Durchführung seines Verbots.” Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) 40.

26. Quoted in Joshua Brown’s review of *Maus I* in *Oral History Review* 16 (1988): 103-04.

27. “A Conversation with Art Spiegelman. With John Hockenberry,” Talk of the Nation. National Public Radio, 20 Feb. 1992.

English. A natural language *gestus* is required here because at that time Vladek would have spoken his national language, Polish. It is only logical that Vladek's broken speech only appears on the level of the frame story, the narrative time of the present. Past and present, clearly distinguished by the language track, are thus nevertheless suffused in the present itself in Vladek's broken English, which provides the linguistic marker of the insuperable distance that still separates Artie from Vladek's experiences and from his memories. Artie, after all, always speaks fluent English as his native language.

If Spiegelman's project is mimetic approximation not of the events themselves, but of the memories of his parents, and thus a construction of his own "post-memory" (Marianne Hirsch), then this mimesis is one that must remain fractured, frustrated, inhibited, incomplete. The pain of past trauma is repeated through narration in the present and attaches itself to the listener, to Artie as listener inside the text as well as to the reader who approaches the contents of Vladek's autobiographic tale through its effects on Artie. Artie as a *Kunstfigur* – the same but not quite the same as the author Art Spiegelman – thus becomes the medium in the text through which we ourselves become witnesses to his father's autobiographic narration. While this narration, gently and sometimes not so gently extracted from the survivor, aims at a kind of working through in language, it is a mimetic process that will never reach an end or come to completion, even if and when Vladek's tale catches up to the postwar period. And then there is always that other most painful obstacle to a full mimetic knowledge of the past. For the process of an *Angleichung ans Vergangene*, an assimilation to the past, is not only interrupted by the inevitable intrusion of everyday events during the time of the interviews; another even more significant gap opens up in the sense that only Vladek's memories are accessible to Artie. The memories of Artie's mother, whose suicide triggered Art Spiegelman's project in the first place, remain inaccessible not only because of her death, but because Vladek, in a fit of despair after her death, destroyed her diaries in which she had laid down her own memories of the years in Poland and in Auschwitz. And just as Artie had accused his mother for murdering him, he now accuses his father for destroying the diaries: "God DAMN you! You . . . you murderer!" (I 159). Anja's silence thus is total. If it was Anja's suicide that generated Art Spiegelman's desire to gain self-understanding through mimetic approximation of his parents' story and of survivor guilt, then the discovery that the diaries have been burned points to

the ultimate elusiveness of the whole enterprise. Artie's frustration about the destruction of the diaries only makes explicit that ultimate unbridgeable gap between Artie's cognitive desires and the memories of his parents. Indeed it marks the limits of mimetic approximation, but it marks them in a quite pragmatic way and without resorting to sublime new definitions of the sublime as the unrepresentable within representation.

All of Spiegelman's strategies of narration thus maintain the insuperable tension within mimetic approximation between closeness and distance, affinity and difference. *Angleichung* is precisely not identification or simple compassion. By listening to his father's story Artie understands how Vladek's whole habitus has been shaped by Auschwitz and the struggle for survival, while Vladek, caught in traumatic reenactments, remains oblivious to that fact: rather than assuming continuity, Vladek's storytelling seems to assume a safe and neutralizing distance between the events of the past and his New York present. But his concrete behavior constantly proves the opposite. Artie, on the other hand, is always conscious of the fact that the borders between past and present are fluid, not only in his observation of his father, but in his self-observation as well. Mimetic approximation as a self-conscious project thus always couples closeness and distance, similitude and difference.

This dimension becomes most obvious in those passages in *Maus II* where Spiegelman draws himself drawing *Maus* (II 41ff.). The year is 1987; Vladek has been dead for five years; Art works on *Maus II* from the tapes which have now become archive, and *Maus I* has become a great commercial success. This chapter, entitled "Auschwitz (Time Flies)," demonstrates how beyond the multiply fractured layering of language and narrative time, the very pictoriality of the animal comic is significantly disrupted as well. We see Art in profile, sitting at his drawing table, but now drawn as a human figure wearing a mouse mask. It is as if the image track could no longer sustain itself, as if it collapsed under its own weight. Artie's mimicry reveals itself to be a sham. The mask reveals the limits of his project. The ruse doesn't work any longer. The task of representing time in Auschwitz itself, just begun in the preceding chapter, has reached a crisis point. This crisis in the creative process is tellingly connected with the commercial success of *Maus I*: the Holocaust as part of the culture industry. The crisis of representation and the crisis of success throw the author into a depressive melancholy state in which he resists the marketing of his work (translations, a film version, television) through a fit of total regression. He avoids the

annoying questions of the media sharks (“What is the message of your book?” “Why should younger Germans today feel guilty?” “How would you draw the Israelis?” [II 42]) by literally shrinking in his chair from frame to frame until we see a small child screaming: “I want . . . I want . . . my Mommy!” (II 42) The pressures of historical memory are only intensified by Holocaust marketing, to the point where the artist refuses any further communication. The culture industry’s obsession with the Holocaust almost succeeds in shutting down Spiegelman’s quest. The desire for a regression to childhood, as represented in this sequence, however, is not only an attempt to cope with the consequences of commercial success and to avoid the media. This moment of extreme crisis, as close as any in the work to traumatic silence and refusal to speak, also anticipates something of the very ending of *Maus II*.

On the very last page of *Maus II*, as Vladek’s story has caught up with his postwar reunification with Anja, ironically described by Vladek in Hollywood terms as a happy ending and visually rendered as the iris like fade-out at the end of silent films,²⁸ Artie is again put in the position of a child. In a case of mistaken identity resulting from a merging of past and present in his father’s mind, Vladek addresses Artie as Richieu, Artie’s own older little brother who did not survive the war, whose only remaining photo had always stared at him reproachfully during his childhood from the parents’ bedroom wall, and to whom *Maus II* is dedicated. As Vladek asks Artie to turn off his tape recorder and turns over in his bed to go to sleep, he says to Artie: “I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now . . .” (II 136). This misrecognition of Artie as Richieu is highly ambiguous: it is as if the dead child had come alive again, but the traumatic past simultaneously asserts its deadly grip over the present one last time. For these are a dying Vladek’s last words to Artie. This final frame of the comic is followed only by an image of a gravestone with Vladek’s and Anja’s names and dates inscribed and, at the very bottom of the page and below the gravestone, the signature and date “art spiegelman 1978-1991”, years that mark the long trajectory of Spiegelman’s project of approaching an experience which ultimately remains beyond reach.

Much more could be said about Spiegelman’s mimetic memory project, but I hope to have made the case that the Adornean category of mimesis can be made productive in a reading of Holocaust remembrance

28. An observation I owe to Gertrud Koch.

in such a way that the debate about the proper or correct Holocaust representation, while perhaps never irrelevant, can be bracketed and the criteria of judgment shifted. If mimetic approximation, drawing on a variety of knowledges (historical, autobiographic, testimonial, literary, museal), were to emerge as a key concern, then one could look at other Holocaust representations through this prism rather than trying to construct a Holocaust canon based on narrow aesthetic categories pitting the unrepresentable against aestheticization, or modernism against mass culture, memory against forgetting. This might open up a field of discussion more productive than the ritualistic incantations of Adorno regarding the culture industry or the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz.

As a work by a member of the "second generation," *Maus* may indeed mark a shift in the ways in which the Holocaust and its remembrance are now represented. It is part of a body of newer, "secondary" attempts to commemorate the Holocaust while simultaneously incorporating the critique of representation and staying clear of official Holocaust memory and its rituals. I have tried to show how Spiegelman confronts the inauthenticity of representation within a mass cultural genre while at the same time telling an autobiographic story and achieving a powerful effect of authentication. Like many other monuments, works of film, sculpture, literature, theater, even architecture, Spiegelman rejects any metalanguage of symbolization and meaning, whether it be the official language of Holocaust memorials or the discourse that insists on thinking Auschwitz as the telos of modernity. This approach to Holocaust history takes place in an intensely personal, experiential dimension that finds expression in a whole variety of different media and genres. Prerequisite for any mimetic approximation (of the artist/reader/viewer) is the liberation from the rituals of mourning and of guilt. Thus it is not so much the threat of forgetting as the surfeit of memory²⁹ that is the problem addressed by such newer works. How does one get past the official memorial culture? How does one avoid the trappings of the culture industry while operating within it? How does one represent that which one knows only through representations and from an ever growing historical distance? All this requires new narrative and figurative strategies including irony, shock, black humor, even cynicism, much of it present in Spiegelman's work and constitutive of what I have called mimetic approximation. The

29. The term is Charles S. Maier's. See his essay "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial," *History and Memory* 5 (1992): 136-51.

Bilderverbot is simply no longer an issue since it has itself become part of official strategies of symbolic memorializing. This very fact may mark the historical distance between Adorno – whose “after Auschwitz” chronotope, with its insistence on the prohibition of images and the barbarism of culture, has a definite apocalyptic ring to it – and these younger postmodernist writers and artists to whom the prohibition of images must appear like Holocaust theology. But if, on the other hand, Adorno’s notion of mimesis can help us understand such newer artistic practices and their effects in a broader frame, then there may be reasons to suspect that Adorno’s rigorously modernist reflection itself blocked out representational possibilities inherent in that mimetic dimension. In its hybrid folding of a complex and multi-layered narration into the mass cultural genre, Spiegelman’s image-text makes a good case against a dogmatic privileging of modernist techniques of estrangement and negation, for it demonstrates how estrangement and affective mimesis are not mutually exclusive, but can actually reinforce each other.

Finally, there is a weaker, less apocalyptic reading of Adorno’s “after Auschwitz” statements. Such a reading would emphasize Adorno’s historical critique of that attempt to resurrect German culture after the catastrophe, that attempt to find redemption and consolation through classical cultural traditions – Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* as proof of German “tolerance” of the Jews, Goethe’s *Iphigenie* as proof of German classical humanism, German poetry, music, and so forth: “Healing through quotation” – as Klaus Scherpe has called it.³⁰ The spirit of such a critique of an official German post-Auschwitz culture is one that Adorno shares with the newer generation of artists in many countries today all of whom try to work against contemporary versions of official Holocaust culture the dimensions of which Adorno could not even have imagined yet during his lifetime. There is another sentence, less frequently quoted, but perhaps more pertinent today than the famous statement: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” A sentence that continues to haunt all contemporary attempts to write the Holocaust: “Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter.”³¹ Only works that avoid that danger will stand. But the strategies of how to avoid such degeneration into idle chatter in artistic representations cannot be written in stone.

30. Scherpe, ed., *In Deutschland unterwegs 1945-48* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982).

31. Adorno, *Prisms* 34.