

# Metafiction in Art Spiegelman's 'Maus'

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**Katalenić, Vida**

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UČITELJSKI FAKULTET  
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Mentor rada:  
doc. dr. sc. Nikola Novaković

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the elements of metafiction in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* by analyzing and discussing the photographs, maps, diagrams, masks, internal monologues and narrative interruptions used throughout the novel. Discussed at length, these metafictional devices are analyzed not only within the strict frames of the novel's narratives, but also in the context of the time and place in which the plot is set in order to shed light on why they play such an important part in conveying the story at hand. This thesis focuses on explaining the relevance of each metafictional device in the author's process of telling his father's story about surviving the Holocaust, as well as his own story about the creation of the novel. Keeping in mind the definition of metafiction, this thesis places the emphasis on the novel's self-awareness by which the author makes the reader an active observer of and participant in his creative efforts and struggles in the making of the book. The thesis outlines how metafiction manifests on the pages of Spiegelman's graphic memoir, as well as how it affects the reader's experience of the novel.

**Key words:** Art Spiegelman, metafiction, *Maus*, maps, photographs

## Sažetak

Cilj ovog diplomskog rada je ispitati elemente metafikcije u grafičkom romanu *Maus* Arta Spiegelmana analizirajući uporabu fotografija, karti, dijagrama, maski, unutarnjih monologa i prekida u pripovijedanju. Navedeni metafikcijski postupci analiziraju se ne samo unutar strogih okvira dvaju priča u romanu, već i u kontekstu vremena i mjesta u kojem se radnja odvija kako bi se rasvijetlilo zašto ti postupci igraju tako važnu ulogu u Spiegelmanovu grafičkom romanu. Ovaj rad fokusira se na objašnjavanje važnosti svakog od navedenih metafikcijskih postupaka u pripovijedanju priče autorova oca o preživljavanju holokausta, kao i njegove vlastite priče o stvaranju romana. Imajući na umu definiciju metafikcije, ovaj rad stavlja naglasak na samosvijest romana kojom autor čini čitatelja aktivnim promatračem i sudionikom svojih kreativnih napora i borbi u stvaranju knjige. Rad prikazuje kako se metafikcija manifestira na stranicama Spiegelmanova grafičkog memoara, ali i njezin utjecaj na čitateljevo iskustvo čitanja.

Ključne riječi: Art Spiegelman, metafikcija, *Maus*, karte, fotografije

## 1. Introduction

According to Patricia Waugh, metafiction is (Waugh, 1984, p. 40)

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside of the fictional text.

The aim of this thesis is to examine which metafictional devices are employed in Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* and to discuss how they function. *Maus* has achieved global recognition and received the Pulitzer Award, which not only places it at the top of its genre, but also elevates the genre itself. The book owes this impact to its vivid depiction of two carefully intertwined narratives which tell the story of a Holocaust survivor and that of his son who is struggling to give a voice to his father and, simultaneously, document his own creative process. As part of this effort, he deploys various metafictional devices which involve the use of photographs, maps, diagrams, introspective monologues, and controversial animal masks. All of this makes *Maus* a novel conscious of itself which, as such, pulls the audience into its narrative, effectively blurring the lines between the reader and the read. This thesis examines the metafictional devices of *Maus* in depth and thereby frames both narratives (the one told by the father and the one narrated by the author/protagonist) in the context of how metafiction functions on the larger scale of the book itself, as well as at the level of individual narratives. The thesis also discusses how the novel as a whole reflects its metafictional nature, analyzing the use of photographs, diagrams, maps, masks, introspective monologues and character formation to shed light on the unique language *Maus* uses to communicate its message to its audience. Starting with a few pieces of general information about the impact of *Maus* and its publication in section two, the abovementioned metafictional devices are discussed as follows: section three and four outline the structure of the graphic novel, as well as its self-awareness in the context of the author's difficulty to accurately tell his father's story, struggling to find the right means of expression. The use of photographs is examined in section five, diagrams and maps are discussed in chapter six, and masks are the subject of chapter seven.

## 2. The publication and importance of *Maus*

Banita and Konstantinou write that “Spiegelman has done more than anyone to bring legitimacy to his chosen medium” (2023, p. 4). They point out that “some scholars have gone so far as to argue that *Maus* ‘created the very category of ‘Greatest Comic Book of All Time’ in the American context; prior to its success in the ‘real world’ of book publishing, such a concept was essentially meaningless” (2023, p. 4). About his approach to the comic book genre, which had previously been created and consumed for primarily entertainment purposes, Spiegelman said: “Instead of making comics into a narcotic, I’m trying to make comics that can wake you up, like caffeine comics that get you back in touch with things that are happening around you” (2023, p. 4). With *Maus* he has certainly achieved that. Choosing to write about the Holocaust and the dehumanization of Jews by opting to portray them as rodents of the Nazi propaganda, Spiegelman brings into the comic genre a delicate topic, colouring it with all the solemnity and tragedy of a documentary which most certainly wakes up the reader to the reality of how brutal and merciless the world can actually be: a place where the villains oftentimes win and no caped superhero comes to the rescue.

The author’s own father doubted that Spiegelman was making a smart move when he decided to write about his survival story: “No one wants to hear such stories”, says the mouse Vladek on the second page of the comic book. “Better you should spend your time to make drawings what will bring you some money” (2003, p. 14). In the end, the success of *Maus* brought Spiegelman not only money, but also the Pulitzer Prize and global recognition as the most canonical cartoonist in comics history (Banita and Konstantinou, 2023, p. 3):

Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* — his book about his parents’ life in nazi-occupied Poland and cross-generational Holocaust trauma — is regarded as one of the highest achievements of the form. His wrenching, intimate, and intellectually withering comics have challenged other cartoonists to engage in more formally ambitious work. His example and advocacy have attracted critical attention not only to his own work but the medium as a whole.

However, the publication of *Maus* was by no means smooth sailing. Spiegelman started writing the graphic memoir in 1978 as a “labor of love, appearing in installments that few were seeing. [...] The now classic graphic memoir earned its author an impressive pile of rejections from traditional presses like Knopf and Norton, which balked at the supposedly insurmountable tension between the book’s lightweight medium and its somber subject matter” (Banita and Konstantinou, 2023, p. 14). In other words, the atrocities of the Holocaust where a dehumanized Jew depicted as a mouse fights for his



survival, depending on nobody but himself as his only means of salvation, severely contradicted the popular comic book culture of the time ruled by Marvel and DC whose audience was used to a very different type of hero. However, it was never Spiegelman's intention to cater to comics readers. His target was a book-reading audience (Banita and Konstantinou, 2023, p. 15, 34, 35):

When Pantheon published *Maus I* in September 1986, the memoir's popular success was nothing short of stratospheric. [...] The memoir became a surprising bestseller, selling close to 100,000 copies in the United States over just a year and a half. It was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle award in Biography/Autobiography and garnered Spiegelman's second Joel M. Cavior Award for Jewish Writing. [...] The graphic memoir has generated more critical attention than any other work in the history of comics, and perhaps even in the history of Holocaust representation, and is frequently assigned in classes on postmodern literature, life writing, Jewish culture, immigration, twentieth-century history, and visual art. [...] *Maus* was published just as four distinct areas of research — around the Holocaust, Jewish studies, visual culture, and memory — converged to forge an enduring narrative about the postwar cultural canon.

Because of its appeal to scholars in all of the abovementioned fields, *Maus* inevitably became of great interest in the late twentieth-century critical writing, which led to Spiegelman being introduced into the pantheon of Jewish American literature soon after the novel was published: "Once academics had agreed on the composition of a comics canon, *Maus* became the centerpiece of that new canon, the highest standard against which all other graphic novels and memoirs have been measured" (Banita and Konstantinou, 2023, p. 35).

All of this resulted from the idea to draw a comic that would depict his father's Holocaust survivor's tale to which his father responded: "No one wants to hear such stories" (2003, p. 14). What made *Maus* captivating was that as Holocaust nonfiction, it "ranked among the first works to depict the genocide 'without trying to extract hope or inspiration from it'" (Banita and Konstantinou, 2023, p. 15). As it turned out, and contrary to Vladek's opinion, there *were* those who wanted to hear such stories, and such stories are being heard to this very day.

### 3. The self-aware graphic novel

It becomes clear on the first few pages of *Maus* that this is a work of fiction that is aware of itself, and as such functions as a notable example of how metafiction can add to the perceived reality of a graphic novel. It is enough that we as readers know the bare minimum of the author's name and profession to notice that the graphic novel communicates to us its own self-awareness. Namely, the story presented opens with a conversation of two characters: the son and the father. Upon visiting his father, the son, whose name we learn to be Art, is welcomed with a question about his career in the comic book business: "Tell me, how is it by you? How is going the comics business?" To this the son answers: "I still want to draw that book about you" (2003, p. 14), suggesting that the character is in fact Art Spiegelman, the author of the book we are holding in our hands, and that this very book is the book being mentioned. In this manner *Maus* introduces us not only to Spiegelman as the author of the story being told, but also to his father who will presume the role of the story's other narrator, thus making it clear that the fiction at hand is of autobiographical and biographical nature.

*Maus* is thus structured as a framed narrative: we are introduced to the characters of the author and his father and will in the course of the book be guided by them both as they present the framed narrative – that of Vladek's Holocaust survival – as if it were just being written. The other narrative becomes the very process Art Spiegelman goes through in the course of writing his book. As opposed to the framed narrative which takes place before and during World War II in Poland and centers around Vladek's parents as the main protagonists, the second narrative takes place in 1978 and onwards, documenting Spiegelman's visits with his father for the purpose of interviewing him and writing down his Holocaust survivor's story, as well as his own personal mental, emotional and physical journey during its creation. In this manner Spiegelman reveals to the reader both the story of *Maus* and the process of its creation. The two narratives — the narrative in which the story is being told by Vladek and documented by Art and the narrative of the Holocaust story – intertwine throughout the entire novel, enabling the reader to simultaneously consume two entirely different plots set in entirely different timeframes, different locations, and experienced by different characters. The only thing these two stories have in common is the character of Vladek Spiegelman, the Holocaust survivor.

*Maus* is, therefore, not merely a book about surviving the Holocaust, but also a book about its own creation. What makes this possible is precisely the format Spiegelman chooses as his means of expression: that of a comic book. As Banita and Konstantinou write, quoting Spiegelman (2023, p. 5):

Across his career, Spiegelman has held fast to a broad vision of comics; "in their essence," he has suggested, comics "are about time made manifest spatially," forcing the reader into an awareness of

“different times inhabiting the same space”. This is a loose framework, hospitable to endless variations in exactly how time and space interlock on the comics page. Cartooning is, for Spiegelman, an epistemology, a way of seeing. “Because they deal in essences, rather than nuanced description,” comics reveal to him the way the mind works “in encoded, simplified images and concentrated verbal clusters.” Compared to literature, as a combination of word and image, comics comes “closer to the way the mind works than pure language”.

Spiegelman’s narrative strategy allows the reader not only to “read” his father’s traumatic experience, but also observe it like a realistic documentary happening right before the reader’s eyes: a documentary about mice-like people, but a documentary nevertheless. That is why Spiegelman gives extra attention to mentioning his process of “documenting” his father's story by putting an emphasis on himself writing it down as well as recording it on the recorder. Through these interviews with Vladek we are given information about the development of his character and the consequences it would have on him and his son throughout their lives. In this sense the metafictional device of the book being aware of its own process of creation gives the reader awareness about the process of creation of its main character and a detailed insight into the person he would become precisely because of his time of persecution, affecting not only his relationship with himself, but also that with his son, his first wife and his second wife. The frame narrative thus serves a double purpose: to take us along the journey of the book’s creation as well as on the journey of how the story shapes its character. We observe Vladek’s behavior in the present and are able to understand it because we are made witness to his past: both through his own narration and through the narration of his son. The metafictional device plays an important role in this achievement.

#### 4. Narrative structure

Interestingly, Spiegelman does not frame his story with a different narrative emerging into the foreground only at the beginning and the end of the book like a literary frame. Instead, every few pages Vladek's story gets interrupted, and the reader is abruptly catapulted into Vladek's or Art's residence where the son is asking questions or making comments on his father narration. As soon as Vladek begins his story by telling about his first girlfriend Lucia, Art interrupts him by saying: "But, pop... Mom's name was Anna Zylberberg!...", to which Vladek angrily replies: "All this was before I met Anja - just listen, yes?" (2003, p. 16). At other times it is Vladek who interrupts the story by, for example, being distracted by accidentally spilling the bottle with his pills, which leads him to tell the story about his eye problems and his dissatisfaction with his doctor (2003, p. 41). Chapter One of Maus thus finishes with Vladek's comment: "Well, it's enough for today, yes? I'm tired and I must count still my pills", to which Art replies: "Okay, good idea... my hand is sore from writing all this down" (2003, p. 42). Such moments serve to introduce the reader to the framed-narrative format which is used throughout the book.

Spiegelman never allows his father's story to take full precedence, instead interrupting it on a regular basis as a way of reminding us that both of the narratives are equally important. The reader is never allowed to dwell entirely in the past because every once in a while the events of World War 2 and the Holocaust are interrupted by a panel of the father and the son sitting showing the former talking and the latter writing (2003, p. 47, 69), or a panel of Vladek on his exercise bike (2003, p. 81, 83, 90, 93) as he elaborates on the story in 1978, i.e. the present time of the frame narrative. In the course of the novel the narration constantly shifts from the threatening streets of Poland to the safe apartments of America where the fleeing mice eventually found their refuge among Americans portrayed as dogs. As Banita and Konstantinou quote Spiegelman saying, this is "time made manifest spatially" (2023, p. 5) and "history compressed into easily disseminated visual packages, giving those visual packages the potential to deliver their meanings to a wider audience" (2023, p. 5).

These interruptions of the framing narrative into the framed narrative serve a threefold purpose. They provide the commentary of the survivor Vladek on the events of his past as well as the inquiries of his son into the details he wants clarified. This gives the reader extra information which cannot be observed directly from the framed narrative. For example, when the persecution of Jews starts in Poland, Anja is shown saying: "Maybe we should move away, like some others have", to which Vladek responds: "If things get **really** bad, we'll run back to Sosnowiec" (2003, p. 39). The narrative is here interrupted with a drawing of Art asking his father: "Why would Sosnowiec be any safer than Bielsko?" (2003, p. 39) to which Vladek responds: "We thought then, that Hitler wanted only the parts from Poland, like Bielsko, what used to be parts from Germany before the first world

war” (2003, p. 39). The interruptions provide information about Vladek’s character and how the trauma of the Holocaust shaped him into the person he has become, while also serving as an insight into Spiegelman’s creative process, documenting the means and the challenges of writing such a story. These three main points subtly intertwine throughout the graphic novel. For example, when Vladek gets carried away by describing how in his youth his father starved him in order to keep him out of the army training until 1922, when he finally joined, Art interrupts him by saying: “But let’s get back to 1939!” (2003, p. 49), thus staying in control of the narrative as if he were editing it while it was still in the process of being told. Such efforts by Spiegelman to keep his father on track during his storytelling repeat throughout the book. After telling the story about the discussion Vladek had with one of his Jewish friends about whether or not to give his son Richeu to a Polish friend in order to ensure his safety, which Anja refusing to agree to, Vladek is shown pedaling on his bike and making another comment: “Ilzecki and his wife didn’t come out from the war. But his son remained alive; ours did not. And anyway, we had to give Richieu to hide a year later. When we were in the ghetto, in 1943, Tosha took all the children to –”. Here Art interrupts his father again by saying: “Wait! Please, dad. If you don’t keep your story chronological, I’ll never get it straight... Tell me more about 1941 and 1942” (2003, p. 83), to which Vladek responds: “Okay. I’ll make it so how you want it” (2003, p. 84). Spiegelman thus shows that the process of writing his novel required his agency even in the stage of listening to his father’s story and that it was being edited even in the process of being told to him by his father.

At the beginning of Chapter Four, after Vladek welcomes his son into his home for another session of storytelling, he is shown looking at Art and asking: “What are you holding?”, to which Spiegelman answers: “A new tape recorder... writing things down is just too hard” (2003, p. 75). Here the reader is introduced to a new way Art would use to document his father’s narrative. Instead of writing it all down by hand, he would henceforth record it on a tape recorder. It is worth mentioning that one of the first editions of *Maus* was sold with a tape of Vladek’s voice telling the story alongside the squeaking of his exercise bike.

Spiegelman often makes his creative process and his book the topic of the conversation between the characters. When he visits his father in Chapter Six for another interview, he tells him: “Mala and I were just talking about my book... I’ve already started to sketch out some parts. I’ll show you... See, here are the black market Jews they hanged in Sosnowiec... And here’s **you**, saying: ‘Ach. When I think of them, it still makes me cry!’” (2003, p. 134-135). This scene serves as emblematic of *Maus*’ metatextuality, as Spiegelman shows the three mice-like characters observing the notebook Art is holding and commenting on the very scene we have read in Chapter Four. Spiegelman’s book is not only the subject of conversation with his parents, but the subject of their visual

examination. The characters are seen looking at the very same drawings that we the readers have just seen as well. In this manner we are pulled into their world and made to stand alongside the characters: we become the consumers of the content which is the object of the characters' observation as much as our own.

We then see Mala saying: "It's an important book. People who don't usually read such stories will be interested.", to which Vladek comments: "Yes. I don't read **ever** such comics, and even **I** am interested. I know already my story by **heart**, and even **I** am interested!" (2003, p. 135). Mala then continues the conversation by saying: "It should be very successful" and Vladek adds: "Yah. Someday you'll be famous, like... what's-his-name? You know... the big-shot cartoonist... Yah! Walt Disney!" (2003, p. 135). Amused by the conversation, Art is shown leaving the frame "to get a pencil". "I've just gotta write this conversation down before I forget it!" (2003, p. 135). On the next page we see Mala and Vladek in the foreground while Art is shown in the background, immersed in his notebook, jotting down the conversation that just took place. We are again shown the process of the creation of the graphic novel we are reading. This particular conversation is also relevant because it stands in complete opposition to Vladek's words said to Art at the very beginning of the novel when he said that drawing such a story wouldn't bring him any money because nobody wants to hear them. In Chapter Eight, however, Vladek acknowledges that his son's comic book has such a potential to captivate the reader that even he, who otherwise never reads comics and who already knows the story, would read the book himself. Mala foresees that Art would become famous and Vladek even compares him to Walt Disney who became famous after creating his character Mickey Mouse, subtly hinting at the fact that it was precisely Art's choice of telling the Holocaust story through the drawings of mice and the medium of the comic book that would make people interested in reading it. In other words: Spiegelman's artistic expression, as controversial as it was, is given credit for the audience's interest in a somber Holocaust story. *Maus* did become a global success and indeed made Spiegelman famous, not solely because of the story it told, but also because of "how" Spiegelman chose to tell Metafiction as a means of expression

It can be argued that *Maus* owes its structure as well as its ability to interact with the audience and successfully convey its message precisely to metafiction as a means of its expression. As Klinckowitz writes, "Metafiction's strength may derive, at least in part, from the conventional novel's self-perceived weakness. The moment for this insight came in 1960, during the "death of the novel" controversy in which critics were complaining that the novel, an eighteenth-century form, might no longer be adequate to express the transformed nature of reality" (2017, p. 2). This is especially pronounced in *Maus*, where the nature of reality becomes chaotic as a result of the atrocities of World War II and the Nazi treatment of Jews. Spiegelman depicts a world in ruins: the world of the European

Jews and the peaceful life they knew came crashing down, ultimately becoming so deconstructed it could no longer be perceived as normal. This trauma, unable to be objectively expressed, had to find a new means of expression: a novel which would communicate the difficulty of expression with its very form. Art Spiegelman then portrays this “survivor’s tale” in two ways: by choosing an unconventional art form to literally illustrate it, and by repeatedly emphasizing his personal difficulty in the process of that illustration. In this manner the reader gets a clear message that, on the one hand, this is a story about a reality so dehumanizing it likens people to vermin, and on the other hand so difficult to talk about that drawing cartoons and repeatedly emphasizing the hardship of such illustration is part of the story.

The world of European Jews changed overnight, their position in the society shifting from one of people to one of vermin, and their treatment in that society corresponded with such a perception. This caused such trauma in the survivors that many of them, including their children, find it difficult to fully understand it, let alone accurately describe it. This is what Art Spiegelman is struggling with in *Maus*, and this is why metafictional strategies become so necessary in his graphic novel. Klinkowitz explains that conventional fiction had a “totalizing effect, its assurance (to readers who have willingly suspended their disbelief) that the world it depicts is sufficiently manageable to be contained in a narrative under the author's absolute control” (2017, p. 2). It is safe to say that the world Spiegelman is illustrating in *Maus* is far from manageable and therefore cannot be contained in a narrative under the author’s control. Metafiction in *Maus* then serves as a device to inform the reader that Spiegelman has nothing under his control, and this fact greatly torments him to the point of being the trigger and possibly even the cause of his depression. When in *Maus II* his wife Francoise asks Art, “Depressed again?”, he answers: “Just thinking about my book... It’s so presumptuous of me. I mean, I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father... How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? ... Of the Holocaust?...” (2003, p. 174). In the course of this conversation with his wife, Art further explains: “I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip! I guess I bit off more than I can chew. Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing. There is so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean reality is too complex for comics... So much has to be left out or distorted” (2003, p. 176). In this contemplation Art reveals to the reader that his inability to grasp the reality he is trying to portray in his book makes him doubt in the medium itself and even tempts him to give up the project.

In the second chapter of *Maus II*, “Auschwitz: Time Flies”, Spiegelman is shown sitting at his table, drawing his comic while wearing a mouse mask. Until this point in the comic book, we always see Art as a character drawn with a mouse head, but the first page of this chapter introduces

for the first time the author as a human being merely wearing a mouse mask. What used to be a mouse head is now a visible mask tied on the back of his head with a piece of string while the back of his head is drawn as the back of a human head with hair. The fact that Spiegelman wears a visible mask of a mouse as he is portrayed writing his second novel conveys another unspoken message. Namely, Art's mouse mask is not the same as Vladek's or any of the other Jews the novel is illustrating. In this instance, the graphic novel visually conveys that his mask is the one placed over his human face and tied at the back of his head. In other words, Art was never in Vladek's shoes; Art was never a dehumanized person maltreated by Nazi soldiers, transported to Auschwitz, tortured and exterminated or almost exterminated. He may be telling his father's story, and he may be his father's son, but his mouse mask is nothing more than a mask, voluntarily tied around his head and only superficially making him into a character of his father's story. It may be that after this mask is removed, only a skull remains, which could signify his own irrelevance in the story, but nevertheless, Art *can* remove the mask while his parents and other Jews could not. Unlike them, Art is not and never has been, treated as vermin.

This awareness might as well be the cause of Spiegelman's artistic crisis and in part even his depression. He is aware that he has no authority to tell his father's story and that too makes the process of telling it so difficult. In an earlier conversation with his wife Art goes as far as saying: "I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived though!... I guess it's some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did" (2003, p. 176). This "survivor's guilt" will also be addressed in Art's conversation with his psychiatrist Pavel, another Holocaust survivor. It is important to note that Art's feelings of inadequacy to tell his father's story are especially present and possibly triggered by the media exposure generated by the success of his first book. Faced with many questions about his creative process and significance of *Maus*, Art draws himself shrieking from an adult to a child, screaming: "I want... ABSOLUTION. No... No... I want... I want... my MOMMY!" (2003, p. 202). He then goes on to say to himself (and the reader): "Sometimes I just don't feel like a functioning adult. I can't believe I'm gonna be a father in a couple of months. My father's ghost still hangs over me" (2003, p. 203). When he arrives at the door of his therapist, Art is still drawn as a child with a mouse mask and as such he tells Pavel that he is feeling completely messed up: "Even when I'm left alone, I'm totally BLOCKED. Instead of working on my book I just lie on my couch and stare at a small grease spot on the upholstery. Somehow my arguments with my father have lost a little of their urgency... and Auschwitz just seems too scary to think about... so I just LIE there..." (2003, p. 203-204).



As Klinkowitz argues, “Playfulness on the page is a frequent feature of metafiction, serving as a friendly reminder that this new type of novel is less a representation of reality to be projected in the reader's mind than it is an event happening on the page” (2017, p. 3). In the case of Spiegelman’s *Maus* this claim should be carefully examined. It could be argued that the very form of Spiegelman’s expression is an embodiment of “playfulness on the page” because his graphic novel is entirely made of pages filled with cartoons. However, the author’s choice to make such a novel and employ the device of metafiction to tell his story stems from a completely different intention than to be playful and represent reality in a manner that signifies a lesser projection into the reader’s mind. Namely, Spiegelman’s intention is to portray reality in as realistic a way as possible and project it into the reader’s mind not only by capturing his full attention with the cartoons on the page, but also by putting an emphasis on the difficulty such a reality poses in being represented. The choice of using mice masks underscores Spiegelman’s portrayal of reality as shocking, and the direct analysis of the struggle Spiegelman faces while telling the story portrays reality as so traumatic that it is beyond the reach of his artistic grasp and therefore impossible to be accurately conveyed. There are no appropriate words that could describe such a reality, so Spiegelman resorts to drawings, which makes the reader hyper-aware and even more engaged with the material presented than any written traditional novel could achieve. Metafiction in *Maus* is in itself proof that the graphic novel takes itself very seriously.

## 5. Metafiction and form: photography

Discussing the breadth of metafiction's playfulness, Klinkowitz's argues that "[a]n important feature of the metafictional impulse is its delight in showing readers what can be done with the form." (2017, p. 3). By inserting maps and photographs into the graphic novel and making them a part of the story, Spiegelman not only demonstrates what can be done with the form of his novel, but also puts even greater emphasis on the autobiographical, biographical and documentary nature of his novel. While maps stand as a reminder of real places described in the book, photographs confirm that both Art, Vladek and Anja are based on real people who lived through or witnessed real events, and that the story being told is indeed of (auto)biographical. We, of course, have the author's word for it, but to support his claim he also provides us with photographic evidence. Liza Futerma explains this technique in the following way (2023, p. 202-203):

Spiegelman's *Maus* undertook the unprecedented task of recording Vladek's account of the Holocaust not through the photographic medium, but in comic book form, depicting the atrocities of World War II through drawings that portray humans as anthropomorphic animals. Spiegelman's recourse to mask-like animalistic drawings, along with his explicit visual references to masks, reveal his awareness of the drawings' potential for distortion and illusion. To avoid the peril of being perceived as unreliable, Spiegelman turns to photographs to validate his narrative. [...] Spiegelman notes that the photographs in *Maus* function as a "visual phrase" to support and stabilize the drawings, which claim to tell a reliable account "at a time when autobiographical comics weren't quite as common" and comics in general were seen to appeal primarily to the reader's imagination.

However, according to Futerma, Spiegelman had more than one reason to incorporate photographs into his comic book. He not only wanted to give his illustrated story a believable historical background; he also wanted to warn his readers that it isn't prudent to rely only on photography as historical evidence. In Futerma's words (2023, p. 193):

Though Spiegelman took the radical step of integrating actual photographs in *Maus*, his decision prompts us to wonder: Why do some photographs appear in cartoon form, as simulated photographs, while others are reproductions of real photos? I maintain that the real photos embedded in the graphic text purposefully deviate from the canon of Holocaust photography, showing the ways in which photographs like these can deceive the observer to believe that the Holocaust was not "all that bad after all", whereas comics reliably retell the atrocities of World War II. In other words, Spiegelman comments on the shortcomings of photography in authentically recording historical events, while underscoring the underrated documentary potential of the comics form.

Futerman bases this theory on her observation that the “photographs of Vladek Spiegelman as a healthy-looking young man (Figure 1) and the plump face of Art’s brother, Richieu (Figure 2), are nothing like the images that “have long become part of the Western countries’ collective visual memory” (2023, p. 193). According to Futerman, this serves as Spiegelman’s attempt to discard the reliability of photography as the proof of true history. It may be that that was one of Spiegelman’s intentions, but I would argue it was by no means his primary intention. Spiegelman’s cartoons already show the atrocities of Holocaust, so there is no need to repeat that by showing it on photographs as well. The reader already knows what Vladek and his family went through: what is lacking is to know the real people behind the mice masks. We do not need to visually see the dead bodies or the gas chambers or the shootings on a photograph. We need to see the people who survived it and those who did not. We need to see the people not as defined and dehumanized by the Holocaust (we have mice drawings to show that), but as individuals who existed before and after the Holocaust and were not defined by it. That is why Vladek “looks” healthy and strong on his portrait photo. It was a photo taken in a studio with the intention to make the person being photographed look good. Richie’s portrait inserted at the beginning of *Maus II* shows the actual portrait which hung in the family home of the Spiegelman’s and “haunted” Art his whole childhood. Art’s intention was not to show what the Holocaust did to his little brother, but to show the immortalized image of his brother while he was still alive and well and how the Spiegelman family chose to remember him.

In the same manner, when Spiegelman writes about his mother’s suicide in his earlier comic strip, also included in *Maus*, Spiegelman there inserts a real photograph of his mother and himself (Figure 3). This photograph is obviously from an earlier time in Spiegelman’s life because it shows him as a child, while he was 20 years old when his mother committed suicide. The suicide itself is drawn: in the comic strip we see an image of Art’s mother lying in the tub with her wrists slit. We also see how her suicide affected Art and his father: it was a trauma none of them ever fully recovered from. That is why the photograph inserted into that comic strip shows a happier time. I would argue that this is Spiegelman’s way of pointing out that his mother’s suicide did not dehumanize or define her. It also did not define either him or his relationship with his mother. The photograph of them together looking healthy and happy serves as a reminder that people exist outside of tragedy, death and trauma which befalls them. In other words: they are not defined by it. That is also why the other two photographs in *Maus* portray people as healthy, strong and alive. Vladek and Richieu were more than victims of the Holocaust. They were more than dehumanized Jews killed or traumatized by the war. They existed before the tragedy and as such they exist after the tragedy, even if only on a photograph. It is also of significance that Vladek calls the portrait of himself “a souvenir”. Souvenirs

normally serve as mementos brought home from a trip abroad. This implies that Vladek wants to remember the Holocaust as only one trip in his life, not an event which defines his life or him as a person.

Futerman also points out that “the portraits of Anja and Richieu have been discussed at length by Marianne Hirsch, who argues that photos “function as specters reanimating their dead subjects with indexical and iconic force,” restoring “the sense of family, safety, and continuity that has been hopelessly severed” during and after the Holocaust” (2023, p. 198). Here the emphasis is on “the ability of photography to preserve the ghostly presence of the dead as well as their roles in the lives of the living far beyond the moment of their erasure from the family unit” (2023, p. 198). This is especially true of Anja’s and Art’s photograph inserted at the beginning of his comic strip *Prisoner Of The Hell Planet: A Case History* and as such presented in *Maus*. Futerman reminds us that “the photo is what draws Vladek to reluctantly engage with his son’s comic strip, despite his suspicion of the comics medium” (2023, p. 198).

Indeed, Art’s character in *Maus* expresses his own surprise at the fact that his father read one of his comics: “Gee. I’m surprised that Vladek read this when he found it. He NEVER reads comics... He doesn’t even look at my work when I stick it under his nose” (2003, p. 106). When Art confronts his father about it, Vladek’s responds: “Yes. I found it when I looked for the things you asked me last time. Hoo! I saw the picture there of mom, so I read it... and I cried” (2003, p. 106). Here Vladek explains that he read the comic strip only because he saw the photo of his late wife. In other words: it was the photo inserted in the comic that prompted Vladek to look at one of his son’s comic strips. If the photo had not been there, he most probably would not have been interested in reading the comic. This illustrates the power of photography to draw attention to the material presented precisely because photography signals that the material has something to do with the real person portrayed on the real photo. This may indeed be why Spiegelman decided to utilize this power of photography in order to give historical significance to his comic books. In the abovementioned discussion about the photo of his late wife, Vladek says to his son: “It’s good you got it outside your system. But for me it brought in my mind so much memories of Anja. ... Of course I’m thinking always about her anyway” (2003, p. 106). To this Vladek’s current wife reproaches him by saying: “Yes. You keep photos of her all around your desk - like a shrine!” (2003, p. 106). This informs the reader that photographs are present in *Maus* even when they are not drawn or presented as actual photographs. This directly ties in to Hirsch’s and Futerman’s observation that “photos preserve the ghostly presence of the dead as well as their roles in the lives of the living far beyond the moment of their erasure from the family unit” (2023, p. 198). Photographs in *Maus* therefore also signal that *Maus* is not just a story about the Holocaust, but primarily a story about people with lives before and after the Holocaust. It is a story

about victims and survivors who had families and lives before and after the tragedy of the Holocaust befell them.

When it comes to the photos which were drawn as part of the comic strip, Spiegelman also uses them as a medium to expand on his story, and we know he had access to the actual photographs because he draws the very moment Vladek showed them to him. However, because this is primarily Vladek's story and the story which is being told by his son Art, it is understandable why the only real photographs inserted in the comic book are those of Vladek, Richeu, Anja and Art. To the author those people are the most relevant because they are the people of his nuclear family. All other family members are presented on illustrated photographs – as mice – but also portrayed outside of the Holocaust (Figure 4). So, rather than just discredit photography as a reliable medium, Art uses photography to remind the readers that, as horrifying and dehumanizing as it was, the Holocaust did not define the people who were its victims or survivors: it was a tragic event, but only one of the events that happened to them, while they existed and continue to exist outside of its horrors as people on a photograph.

In conclusion, Futerman emphasizes that “Spiegelman on the one hand challenges the value of photography as a direct access point to the past and on the other hand elevates the documentary quality of comics. In doing so, he invites us to approach comics with the understanding that it can provide historical evidence where other forms of representation fall short” (2023, p. 193). If we take all this into consideration, we could classify *Maus* as a work of what “Linda Hutcheon has called historiographic metafiction, in which the historical record itself is shown to be quite an artificial construction” (Klinkowitz, 2017, p. 3). There is no question about the truthfulness of the story being told because *Maus* is indeed based on the true story of a Holocaust survivor, but the historical record is being presented to the reader in such a matter that it could indeed be argued that such an illustration results in an artificial construction of the said historical record. This adds yet another significance to the panel where Spiegelman, wearing his mouse mask, despairs over his writing of his father's story. No matter how truthfully he wants to portray it, he ultimately fails. This failure is confirmed by the fact that “despite its historical and biographical subject matter as well as the extensive research that Spiegelman conducted in order to create a realistic account, *The New York Times* included the book in its fiction bestseller's list. It was only due to Spiegelman's strong objection that Pantheon classified *Maus* as non-fiction” (2023, p. 197).

Even if it is based on a true story and has the photographs to confirm it, the “playfulness on the page” that metafiction inevitably brings and its many devices that show off what can be done with the form lead to history being perceived as an artificial construction, whether the author wishes that or not, and regardless of how much he tries to avoid it. Spiegelman is aware of this fact when his

character in the graphic novel laments to his wife: “reality is too complex for comics... So much has to be left out or distorted” (2003, p. 176). To this Spiegelman’s wife answers: “Just keep it honest honey” (2003, p. 176). As simple as the advice seems, I would argue that it is precisely Spiegelman’s honesty in both *Maus* and *Maus II* that made the book so vivid that its reality becomes almost palpable.

## 6. Metafiction and form: maps and diagrams

The previous section discussed photographs and masks as metafictional devices which serve to connect the two narratives of *Maus* as well as give the reader a deeper insight into its characters and their position in the world, both as dehumanized caricatures and real people with real faces who exist on photographs as much as in the drawings on the page. An important role in this approach is played by Spiegelman's use of diagrams and maps, as "Spiegelman's spatial interface intermingles maps, photographs, diagrams, masks, and innovative frames" (Wong, 2018, p. 84). Following Vladek's story, we are often surprised with a diagram or a map appearing as a separate drawing on the comic book page. The first diagram and map appear in Chapter Three when Vladek is describing his conditions in the work camp: "We were given shovels and picks... Things what we never held in our hands before. And the work was really very hard – we had to move mountains" (2003, p. 57-58). In order to further clarify his father's statement, Spiegelman here includes an extra frame with a drawing of a mountain and valley, and an arrow pointing from the mountain to the valley (figure 5). The description under the drawing states: "The hills were maybe 3 or 4 yards high. We had to make it level" (2003, p. 58). By inserting this little diagram, Spiegelman adds another dimension to his father's narrative: the dimension of spatial reality. The first drawing of a map is presented only two pages later and depicts Poland during World War II (Figure 6), illustrating the distinction between "REICH: Annexed to Germany" and "PROTECTORATE: German controlled government" (2003, p. 62). This map is accompanied with Vladek's words written above it: "You see, the Nazis divided Poland into pieces: **protectorat** and **reich**, with a guarded boarder between" (2003, p. 62). Upon seeing this map, the reader becomes aware that *Maus* is not just a graphic memoir, but also a book about history. Throughout the novel Spiegelman will continue using maps and diagrams to accompany his father's words and to reinforce the reality of his narrative. In Chapter Five, when Vladek is telling his son about his time hiding in the bunkers and Art asks: "Your 'bunkers'?", Vladek replies: "Show to me your pencil and I can *explain* you... such things it's good to know exactly how was it - just in case..." (2003, p. 112). While saying this, Vladek is depicted taking Art's notebook in his hands and drawing on it, saying: "In the kitchen was a coal cabinet maybe 4 foot wide. Inside I made a hole to go down to the cellar. And there we made a brick wall filled high with coal. Behind this wall we could be a little safe" (2003, p. 112). Inserted into this panel is Vladek's detailed drawing of the bunker, meant for the reader's observation and analysis (Figure 7). Two pages later we see Vladek, still holding Art's notebook in his hands, make another drawing: "In June, they arrested Moniek Merin and all the other highest big shots of the Judenrat, the Jewish council. Around this time, we were put into a different house. Here also we made a bunker" (2003, p. 114). included on this page is a drawing of Art's notebook with Vladek's diagram of the house, containing a bunker in the attic, "entrance hidden

by chandelier” (2003, p. 114). These drawings make it possible to not only understand Vladek’s description, but to clearly visualize the hiding spaces used by Jews.

*Maus II* opens with a large detailed map of Auschwitz spread across the whole page, depicting men’s barracks, women’s barracks, S.S. headquarters, workshops, gas chamber and the crematorium. Within the map of Auschwitz is a small map depicting New York and, connecting the two, a large drawing of Vladek in his prison uniform (Figure 8). This map announces to the reader that the story of *Maus I* continues with *Maus II*, which will be mostly set in Auschwitz, with the narrator(s) telling the story from New York. The same map of Auschwitz will again be presented in Chapter Two, where Vladek is shown answering Art’s question: “Where was Birkenau?” (2003, p. 211). “The camp was a part of Auschwitz... It was maybe 2 miles to go from Auschwitz to Birkenau there it was much more big. In Auschwitz we had, say, 20,000 prisoners, in Birkenau was at least 5 times so many. Auschwitz, it was a camp where they gave you to work so they didn’t finish you so fast. Birkenau was even more bad. It was 800 people in a building made for 50 horses. there it was just a death place with Jews waiting for gas...” (2003, p. 211). Vladek would soon give yet another detailed description, accompanied by a diagram: that of the “cremo buildings”:

People believed really it was here a place for showers. So they were told. They came to a big room to undress their clothes ... And everybody crowded inside into the shower room, the door closed hermetic, and the lights turned dark (Zyklon B, a pesticide, dropped into hollow columns). It was between 3 and 30 minutes - it depended how much gas they put - but soon was nobody anymore alive. The biggest pile of bodies lay right next to the door where they tried to get out. They pulled the bodies with an elevator up to the ovens - many ovens - and to each one they burned 2 or 3 at a time. To such a place finished my father, my sisters, my brothers, so many (2003, p. 230-231).

Accompanying Vladek’s detailed description of the execution process, there is an equally detailed diagram of the crematorium which shows the undressing room, the room for melting gold fillings, the execution room, the gas chamber, the chimney, the incineration room with the ovens, the toilet, the coal storage and the corpse lift (Figure 9). This is presented to the reader to observe and analyze: where they “went to shower”, where they were trapped to be gassed, where their bodies lay, where they were pulled up and burned. We see the diagram and we know it is based on reality; not merely a gruesome story, but a piece of gruesome history.

By seeing these places on maps and diagrams, we get the impression that we are reading a history book describing real places, real events and real people. Spiegelman is not only using his father’s narrative to tell a story for the sake of telling a story. On the contrary: his agenda is to also inform and educate. With all the detailed information provided in the graphic memoir, we are left



with an impression that we have just read a textbook on Holocaust. We are left informed, educated and appalled because it dawns on us that all of it really happened, and we are made to contemplate where and how it happened, as well as what it left behind in those who survived.

## 7. Metafiction and masks

Metafiction in *Maus* is particularly evident in Spiegelman's use of animal masks to represent different peoples and their interaction with each other in both narratives of the comic: the narrative of Art interviewing his father and drawing the comic book, as well as the narrative of Vladek experiencing the atrocities of Holocaust. On the one hand, Spiegelman portrays himself as the human author wearing a mouse mask which has been discussed at length, and on the other hand he shows himself as the "character" of the author creating the very text within which he is portrayed. Spiegelman's character in *Maus* serves precisely as the metafictional personification of the text being aware of itself while in the process of being created. This awareness of the text presenting to the reader its own creation is being played out by its characters wearing animal masks.

I would argue that it is precisely this device of zoomorphism which not only makes the text aware of itself and its construction while it is being read, but also makes the reader aware of the core problem the comic is trying to communicate: namely, the problem of dehumanization of one specific group of people by another. Through the masks of mice and cats, the comic reveals to the public a dimension of communication that can potentially communicate something that may be beyond the reach of words. The metafiction here lies not only in the work of art being aware of itself, but by evoking in the reader the awareness of the subject so delicate and somber that traditional literary devices may fail to communicate. By seeing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, the reader easily perceives the central issue of the story at hand. This chapter will attempt to outline the problem this zoomorphism poses in the text and the possible reason why that particular device was selected to illustrate the dehumanization of Jews that took place prior and during the Holocaust.

Chapter One of *Maus II* opens with a close-up of Art's notepad showing drawings of different animals all wearing a scarf around their necks and a striped T-shirt. The animals drawn are a moose, a poodle, a frog, a mouse with long black hair, and a rabbit. We soon discover that this illustration represents Art's struggle to decide how to draw his wife in the comic book he is working on. The first panel of Chapter One entitled "Mauschwitz" shows Art drawn as a mouse, sitting under a tree and drawing in his notepad while his wife – a mouse wearing a striped T-shirt and a bandana around her neck – approaches him, asking: "What are you doing?", to which Art replies: "Trying to figure out how to draw you". His wife then asks him if he wants her to pose, to which he responds by saying: "I mean in my book. What kind of animal should I make you?" We then see an offended mouse saying: "Huh? A MOUSE of course!", to which Art replies "But you're French!", implying that mice are meant to represent Jews only and his wife, being French, does not qualify for that representation. Art even insists that picturing her as a bunny rabbit would be "too innocent" because of the French history with antisemitism: "I mean, how about the Dreyfus affair? The Nazi collaborators! The –" to

which Francoise responds with “OKAY! But if you’re a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I converted, didn’t I?” (2003, p. 171).

Art then goes on to tell a humorous story about introducing Francoise’s character into his comic book: “I’ve got it!.. Panel One: My father is on his exercycle... I tell him I just married a frog... Panel Two: He falls of his cycle in shock. So you and I go to a mouse rabbi. He says a few magic words and ZAP! ... By the end of the page the frog has turned into a beautiful MOUSE!” Francoise remains offended and comments: “I only converted to make Vladek happy. You know, you should have married what’s-her-name? The girl you were seeing when we first met? Then you could just draw MICE no problem.” (2003, p. 172). This sentence in particular shows that for Art drawing mice is not just a means to an end, but an end in itself. In other words, the representation Art used to depict Jews in the comic book is as important as the reason why he used it. The comic book is called *Maus* and it was supposed to be about mice primarily. According to Francoise’s offended comment, Art not only “had to” draw mice to tell his father’s story, he “wanted to” because drawing mice in particular was pivotal for understanding the story.

Further clarification for why this was so is clearly presented at the very beginning of *Maus II* where Spiegelman quotes a newspaper article from Pomerania, Germany, from the mid-1930s, which says: “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!” (2003, p. 164). Right across from this hateful quote, on the very next page, stands a printed picture of the author’s brother Richieu: a beautiful, neatly combed and neatly dressed toddler (wearing suspenders much like Mickey Mouse) who we at this point know died by being poisoned, as mice often are. It could be argued that the juxtaposition of the two media is very intentional, and the author deployed this particular contrast to draw the reader’s attention to the unrealistic monstrosity of antisemitic propaganda which led to the Holocaust and World War II. Using his dead brother’s photograph as irrefutable proof of the Jews’ humanity, Spiegelman indirectly comments that doing “away with Jewish brutalization of the people” (2003, p. 164) essentially meant doing away with people who were entirely innocent of the said brutalization, as innocent as the child on the picture whose dehumanization led to his unnecessary and premature death: “For Richieu”, stands above the picture, “and for Nadja and for Dashiell” (2003, p. 165). Art Spiegelman thus dedicates *Maus II* to the innocent victims of the Holocaust - the Jews who, as those poisoned children, died because somebody had decided they were inhuman enough to exterminate.

This brings us to what Colin Beineke calls “Spiegelman’s problematic zoomorphism” (2023, p. 244). As mentioned in the earlier discussion of Art’s metafictional struggle on how to draw his French wife, Spiegelman’s insistence on drawing Jews as mice was important for him to tell his father’s story as accurately as he possibly could. From the very first page of his comic book, long before we encounter any other animal, it becomes clear that *Maus* is a story about mice: it is a story about a specific group of people and their own unique experience: that of dehumanization and extermination. As Beineke points out: “the depiction of Jews-as-rats served the Nazi agenda of Jewish genocide by assigning Jews the role of vermin – a category meant to justify extermination. Visual depictions of exterminations of Jews-as-rats abounded in Nazi propaganda and were especially prominent in the cartoons of the Nazi weekly magazine *Der Stürmer*” (2023, p. 244). Beineke also mentions Fritz Hippler’s “infamous propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (1940), which cuts back and forth between shots of Jewish people and masses of swarming rats” (2023, p. 243). Beineke emphasizes that in “both Spiegelman’s and Hippler’s representations, Jews are presented not only as non-human, but as faceless replicated abstractions” (2023, p. 243). He then quotes Harold Evans who claims that “Anti-semitism’s lexicon has no word for individuality. It is fixated on group identity. It is necessarily dehumanizing when people become abstractions” (2023, p. 243-244).

This problem is also addressed in Steven Spielberg’s film *The Schindler’s List* (1993). Spielberg portrays just how prominent this perception of Jews was in the Nazi-influenced society when he shows a scene between the German officer Goeth and the Jewish woman he kept as a personal servant and prisoner, regularly beating her because he was attracted to her. Spielberg shows Goeth justifying his attraction for the Jewish woman by trying to see beyond the popularized perception of Jews as rats:

Sometimes we’re both lonely. I would like so much to reach out and touch you in your loneliness. What would that be like, I wonder? I mean - what would be wrong with that? I realize that you’re not a - a person in the - strictest sense of the word, but... Maybe what’s wrong isn’t... It’s not us. It’s this. I mean, when they compare you to - to, uh, vermin and to rodents and to lice... Is this the face of a rat? Are these the eyes of a rat? Hath not a Jew eyes? I feel for you, Helen. No, I don’t think so. You’re a Jewish bitch.

In this scene of the movie Spielberg emphasizes the contrast between the popularized perception of the Jews as less than human – as rats and vermin – and the reality of them as human. The German officer attracted to a Jewish woman looks into her eyes and questions if those are in fact the eyes of a rat because he perceives that they are not. He acknowledges his attraction to her only to show how dominant the popular dehumanizing perception of Jews as rats is, suddenly turning his attraction into

disgust and the urge to beat her. Spielberg here juxtaposes the two images of Jews: the image of a faceless swarm of rats of the Nazi propaganda, and an image of an individual human woman who could be perceived as such were it not for the anti-Semitic propaganda. This is important to keep in mind in order to understand Spiegelman's decision to depict his characters by using the same metaphor used by the Nazis. Beineke explains that (2023, p. 241-242)

although he places the reader in a position that shares the Nazi perspective, Spiegelman undercuts anti-Semitic ideology through a sympathetic portrayal and humanization of the Jews. Rather than being interchangeable, faceless vermin as conceived by the Nazis, Spiegelman's figures are individualized through their distinguishing clothing. Further, the anxious expressions on the character's faces, along with their blanket-clad bodies - a common signifier of distress or trauma - evoke readers' empathy and identification with the refugees as humans.

However, as Beineke also observes, this depiction of Jews as mice is far from unproblematic (2023, p. 242):

In his essay 'On Mice and Mimesis: Reading *Maus* with Adorno', Andreas Huyssen succinctly outlines the root question facing Spiegelman's appropriation of anti-Semitic imagery: "Another objection might be more serious: Spiegelman's image strategies problematically reproduce the Nazi image of the Jew as vermin, as rodent, as mouse'. Even those who believe Spiegelman is successful in subverting racist imagery nevertheless recognize that his re-deployment of such images is a precarious move. Although she largely dismisses the objection, Marilyn Reizbaum, for instance, acknowledges that 'to reproduce these images in kind is to rehearse and reinforce them".

As well observed as these points are, it could be argued that Spiegelman's choice in using the Nazi-propaganda imagery was an apt way to realistically depict the horrors of the Nazi regime. As observed in the above discussed scene from Spielberg's movie, the anti-Semitic propaganda was very effective. The perception of Jews as vermin served its purpose in the society and led to the tragic extermination of millions of innocent lives. When Spiegelman wrote *Maus*, the damage had already been done, so to retrospectively criticize him for depicting Jews as mice serves little purpose. As Beineke observes, Spiegelman himself defended his zoomorphism by stating: "These images are not my images. I borrowed them from the Germans" (Beineke, 2023, p. 243). In the words of Huyssen: "Spiegelman himself draws the reader's attention to his conscious mimetic adoption of this imagery' when he uses a quotation from Hitler on the copyright page of the first *Maus* volume, leading Huyssen

to conclude that ‘Maus thus gives copyright where it is due: Adolf Hitler and the Nazis’” (Beineke, 2023, p. 243).

Beineke further claims that (2023, p. 242)

Spiegelman’s decision to represent his Jewish characters as mice rather than rats is central to understanding his attempt at subversion. As James E. Young argues, ‘By adopting the mouse as allegorical image for Jews, Spiegelman is able to caricature – and thereby subvert – the Nazi image of Jews as vermin.’ The Jewish characters in *Maus* are clearly intended to be viewed as mice, not the rats of Nazi propaganda. This purposeful swapping of rat for mouse demonstrates that although Spiegelman was re-deploying Nazi stereotypes, he was not willing to embrace the Nazi imagery wholesale and without modification: ‘I liked working with a metaphor that didn’t work all that well though I certainly didn’t want my metaphor to work as an endorsement of Nazi ideology’”.

This goes to show that Spiegelman knew that his choice of the mouse metaphor could potentially be perceived as the endorsement of Nazi propaganda. Beineke seems to insist that this is in fact the issue (2023, p. 243):

Whether as mice or rats, however, both representations of Jews are dehumanizing, even if our ‘culturally scripted responses to familiar schemas of sympathetic and antipathetic animals’ identifies mice as sympathetic and rats as antipathetic. The technique of zoomorphism — the depiction of people as animals — is by definition dehumanizing. So although Spiegelman’s Jews-a-mice imagery might not carry with it the connotations of the Nazis’ Jews-as-rats, it nevertheless, as Richard De Angelis points out, “forces the reader to share the Nazi perception of Jews as not quite human.’ So although Spiegelman has recognized the central role of dehumanization in the Holocaust — ‘it (is) clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project’ — he nevertheless crafted *Maus* using only a slightly modified set of tools.

I would strongly disagree with this hypothesis and argue that the depiction of people as animals is not necessarily and certainly not always dehumanizing. Were it so, Spiegelman’s main reason for using mice to depict the Nazi dehumanization of Jews would not hold water because mice are not the only animal metaphor deployed in *Maus*. Namely, Spiegelman also portrays Poles as pigs, Germans as cats, and Americans as dogs. Is he dehumanizing them as well? He does not, because otherwise the mouse metaphor would not be effective at all. To say that the very technique of zoomorphism is by definition dehumanizing would strip *Maus* of all its value in depicting brutal maltreatment and extermination of one nation. *Maus* does not give us the image of Jews as mice persecuted and killed

by other humans, but an image of mice persecuted and killed by cats, while both those mice and cats co-exist in the same space as pigs.

Furthermore, what needs to be emphasized here is the fact that Spiegelman did not simply adhere to the Nazi depiction of Jews as rodents, but has modified the imagery to fit his own agenda. As observed by James E. Young, unlike the swarming rats of the anti-Semitic propaganda, Spiegelman's animals are not rats, but mice, and unlike actual mice, they "display distinctive human features: diverse sets of clothing, clear variations in facial structure, and upright anthropomorphic figurations" (Beineke, 2023, p. 244). In other words: Spiegelman's mice are humanized. He thus cleverly inverts the popular Nazi imagery. As the anti-Semitic propaganda dehumanized Jews by depicting them as rodents, Spiegelman humanizes rodents by depicting them as Jews. The distinction between the two is not only obvious but striking. The filthy disease-carrying rats of Nazi propaganda have absolutely nothing in common with the intricately dressed and poised mice of Spiegelman's universe who live in their own apartments and own their own businesses. There is nothing dehumanizing about those mice: on the contrary, they are clearly human. The only dehumanization done in *Maus* is the dehumanization done at the hand of Nazis.

When Vladek describes to Art the treatment of Jews in Auschwitz, he says: "We came to a big hall, and they shouted on us. Get undressed! Leave your valuables! Line up! Schnell! They took from us our papers, our clothes and our hair. We were cold, and we were afraid. They registered us in... They took from us our names. And here they put me my number" (2003, p. 186). As Vladek tells this part of his story, Art accompanies it with a panel that shows naked figures with mouse heads and clearly human bodies, showing even uniquely human male genitalia. If nowhere else, Spiegelman's point is made here in this scene where these humanoid mice are stripped of papers, possessions, clothes, and even their hair, and their arms are tattooed with numbers. Later in the novel these same humanoid mice will be shown as piles of bodies lying on the ground. Spiegelman makes it very clear where, when and by whom the dehumanization of Jews took place.

Furthermore, when Vladek describes Jewish attempts at survival through the evasion of Nazi soldiers, he gives examples of common hideouts. They crawled through a tunnel made out of shoes (2003, p. 123), hid in bunkers built underneath coal bins and behind false outer walls (2003, p. 113), lived in attics (2003, p. 114), spent their days in sheds and hid in the straw (2003, p. 139), found another hiding place in a storage locker (2003, p. 149), and even lived in deep holes in the ground where the Poles threw their garbage (2003, p. 155). In such conditions Jews starved or survived by chewing turnips and wood (2003, p. 125), covered with worms, and shared their dwellings with actual rats (2003, p. 149). The ultimate and the most tragic means of escaping the Nazis mentioned in *Maus* is that of Tosha poisoning herself and the three children in her care, including Spiegelman's brother

Richieu (2003, p. 111). By giving vivid examples of the conditions Jews lived in during the Nazi persecution, their hideouts and their deaths, Spiegelman clearly illustrates how the dehumanization of those people and the perception of them as vermin led to the very change in how they experienced reality. Being perceived and treated as rodents, they subsequently lived, ate and died as rodents: in attics, in basements, behind walls, in garbage dumps, in shoe tunnels, in storage lockers, chewing on turnips and wood, and dying by gas and poison. Therein lies the tragedy of the anti-Semitic propaganda and Jewish dehumanization: the perception of them as rodents shaped their reality into that of a rodent.

As Spielberg in his movie, Spiegelman too makes clear how prominent the Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda was in society, affecting not just the Nazis themselves, but also the general population. While telling the part of his story when he was still a free Jew walking the Polish streets and wearing a pig mask in order to pass as a Pole, Vladek mentions an incident in a park where Polish children shouted at him: “Look! A Jew! A Jew! Help! Mommy! A Jew!!” (2003, p. 151). Vladek explains to Art: “The mothers always told so: ‘Be careful! A Jew will catch you to a bag and eat you!’ So they taught to their children” (2003, p. 151). Spiegelman thus informs the reader of just how widespread the anti-Semitic propaganda was. Not even children were spared its infection. They were taught by their parents to perceive Jews as inhuman: as a dangerous predator who would catch them and eat them, and children soon adopted that perception. Spiegelman goes as far as illustrating that the Jews, like his father, had to play along and adopt the dehumanizing perception themselves by willingly denying their identity in the attempt to survive. When accused of being a Jew, Vladek, a mouse wearing a pig mask, addresses the children directly by saying: “Don’t be afraid little ones. I’m not a Jew. I won’t hurt you”. He even goes as far as saying: “Heil Hitler” (2003, p. 151). In this scene Spiegelman makes it painfully obvious that Hitler’s victory went so far as to force the Jews to deny their own identity and wear the masks of pigs in public, hailing the one in charge of their persecution. The mask thus achieves its ultimate purpose: to conceal an identity.



## 8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze metafiction in Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus*. Defined by Patricia Waugh as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 1984, p. 40), metafiction in *Maus* is in this thesis observed in the narrative structure, in the self-awareness of the novel and the author's detailed documentation of the creative process he undergoes while writing the novel. The thesis examines metafictional devices used in the text, such as the author's inner monologues which document his creative process along with his personal struggles and feelings of inadequacy while writing about something he does not feel qualified to express. The metafictional connection between the world in the novel and the real world outside of it is conveyed by the insertion of photographs, both real and drawn, the use of diagrams and maps, and the controversial animal masks, therefore informing and educating the reader about real-world facts. The thesis examines metafiction in the novel as a whole, as well as in the two narratives that intertwine in order to tell both parts of the story: that of Vladek's survival of the Holocaust, as well as the story about Spiegelman's creative process of writing it down and illustrating it. The reader is thus given a unique voyeuristic experience and an intimate insight into the author's creative process by witnessing the story being told during its very creation.

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Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. Routledge.

## 10. Appendices

### Figure 1

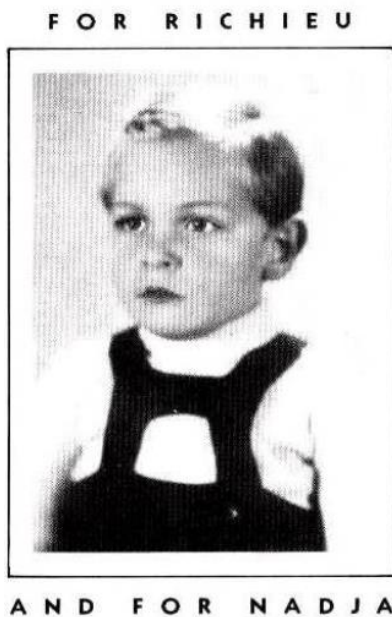
*The photograph of Vladek*



From *The complete Maus* (p. 294). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

### Figure 2

*The photograph of Richieu*



From *The complete Maus* (p. 165). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

**Figure 3**  
*The photograph of Art and his mother*



From *The complete Maus* (p. 102). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

Figure 4

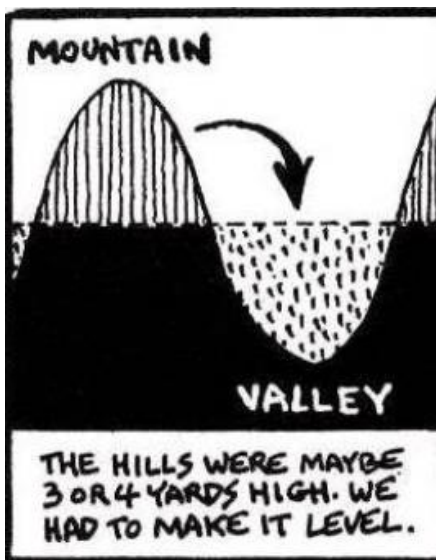
Illustrated photographs of family members



From *The complete Maus* (274). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

Figure 5

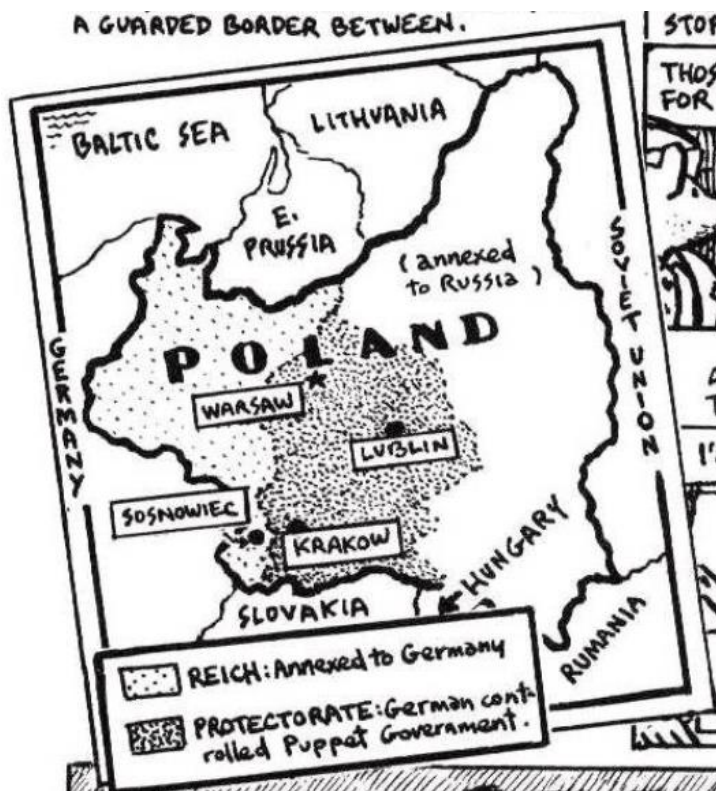
The drawing of a mountain and a valley



From *The complete Maus* (p. 58). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

Figure 6

Poland during World War 2

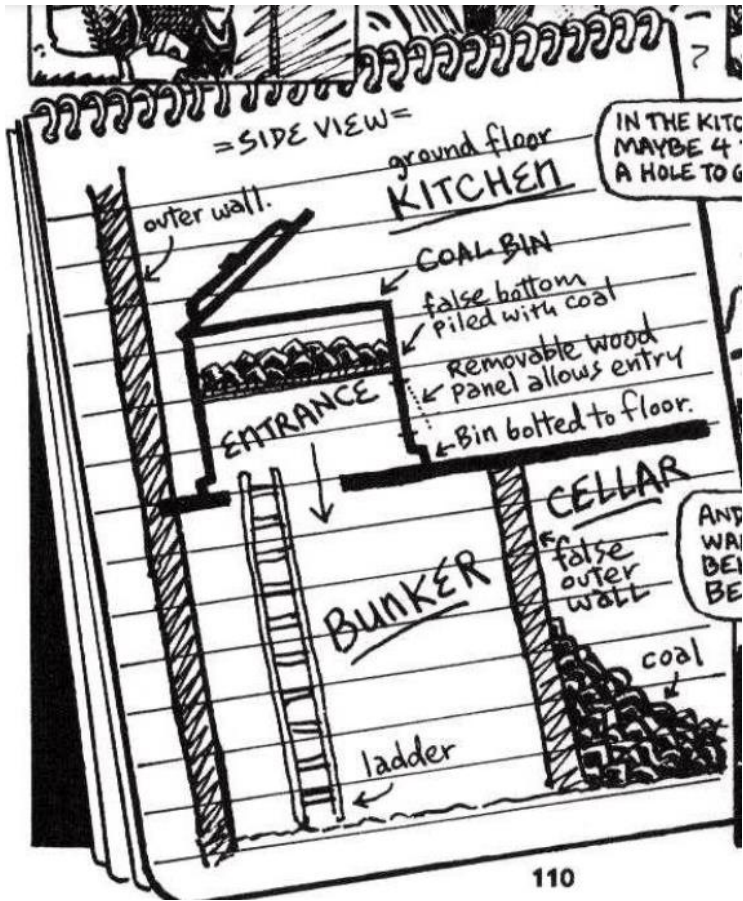




From *The complete Maus* (p. 62). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

**Figure 7**

Vladek's drawing of a bunker

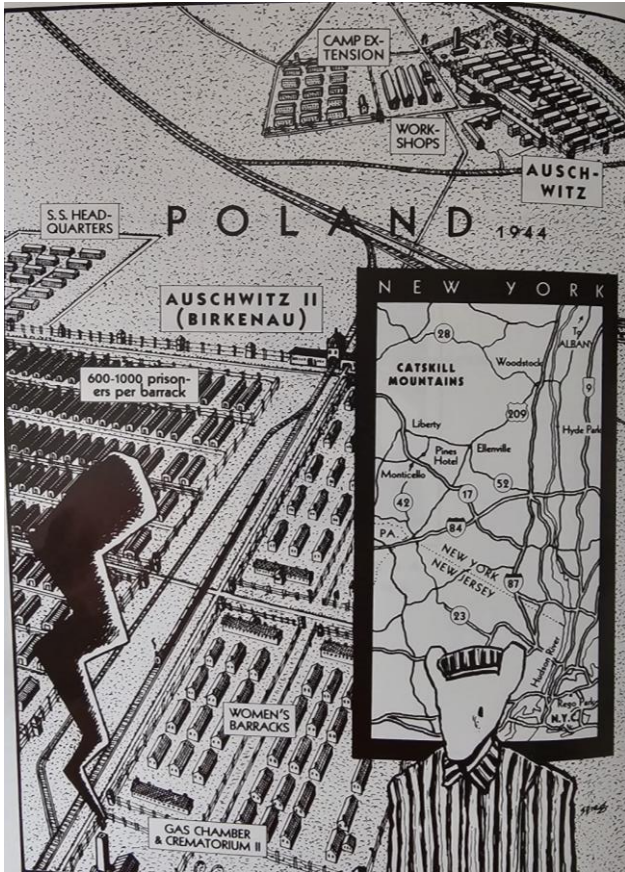


From *The complete Maus* (p. 112). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.



**Figure 8**

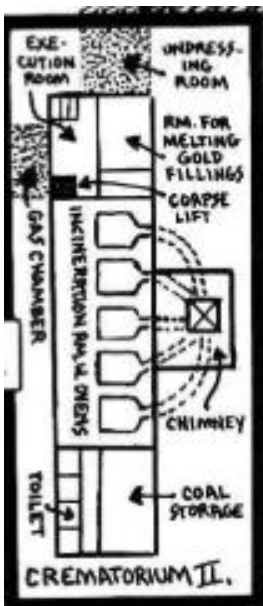
*The maps of Auschwitz and New York*



From *The complete Maus* (p. 166). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

**Figure 9**

*The ground plan of the undressing room, the room for melting gold fillings, the execution room, the gas chamber, the chimney and the incineration room*



From *The complete Maus* (p. 230). Art Spiegelman, 2003, London: Penguin Books. All rights reserved.

## IZJAVA O SAMOSTALNOJ IZRADI RADA

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Vida Katalenić", is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive style.

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Vida Katalenić