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Source: *Discourse*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Special Issue: The Emotions, Gender, and the Politics of Subjectivity (Winter 1992-93), pp. 3-29

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41389264>

Accessed: 18-07-2019 14:04 UTC

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Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory

Marianne Hirsch

All photographs are *memento mori*.
— Susan Sontag

All such things of the war, I tried to
put out from my mind once for all . . .
until you rebuild me all this from your
questions.
— Art Spiegelman

When my parents and I immigrated to the United States in the early sixties, we rented our first apartment in Providence, R.I., from the Jakubowicz, a Polish and Yiddish-speaking family of Auschwitz survivors. Although we shared their hard-earned duplex for four years, I never felt as if I had come to know this tired old couple or their pale and otherworldly daughter Chana, who was only ten, though her parents were already in their late fifties. We might have been neighbors in distant Eastern Europe — Poland and Rumania did not seem so far apart from the vantage point of Providence — and neighbors on Summit Avenue, but worlds separated us. They were orthodox and kept kosher and would not even drink a glass of water in our house. We were eager to furnish our first American apartment with the latest in what we considered modern and cosmopolitan — walnut Danish and tasteful Ria rugs — while their flat, with its haphazard mixture of second-hand furniture and Sears formica, topped with doilies and fringes, had a distinct old-world look about it. Of course, I was simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the numbers tattooed on their arms and could not stop asking my mother for details of their survival in Auschwitz, their respec-

tive loss of spouses and children, how they met each other after the liberation, how they decided to marry, to have Chana, to start a new life on the traces of such inconceivable pain. I remember well, going to their apartment and staring at the few photos framed on a small, round living room table covered with a doily. They were pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Jakubowicz's first families — her husband and three sons, his wife and three daughters. I can't remember these photos visually — in my memory they have acquired a generic status of old-looking studio family pictures. Perhaps one was a wedding photo, others might have depicted the two parents and the children. I just don't know any more. But there was something distinctly discomfiting about them which made me both want to keep staring at them and to look away, to get away from them. What I most remember is how unrecognizable Mr. and Mrs. Jakubowicz seemed in the photos, and how hard I thought it must be for Chana to live in the shadow of these legendary "siblings" whom, because she could not remember them, she could not mourn, whom she had already outlived in age, whom her parents could never stop mourning. I thought that their presence might explain Chana's pallid looks, her hushed speech, her decidedly un-childlike behavior. I spent a lot of time wondering how these photos had survived. Had the Jakubowicz left them with Polish neighbors or friends? Had they perhaps mailed them to family abroad? Had they been able to keep them through their time in Auschwitz, and, if so, how?

I had forgotten the Jakubowicz and their photos until I saw another photo that seemed to me, as much as those, to be hovering on the edge between life and death — a photo of Frieda, my husband's aunt who is a survivor of the Riga ghetto and concentration camp. My mother-in-law had this picture in her collection and then we found another copy among the photos of another aunt who had survived the war in England. My husband recalls, in one of his most vivid childhood memories, the moment — in 1945 — when his family received this photo in a letter announcing Frieda's survival and detailing the death of the rest of her family. I can picture the family sitting around their kitchen table in La Paz, reading Frieda's letter, crying and staring at the picture which had crossed the ocean as proof of life and continuity. I can picture the other aunt, Käthe, receiving the identical picture at nearly the identical moment, though in England, and I can imagine her relief to see Frieda, at least, alive. How many copies of the picture did Frieda have printed, I wonder, and how many relatives did she send it to? And how did those relatives then get up from their kitchen tables, how did they

integrate her image and the knowledge it brought into their lives?

I am fascinated with this multiple dissemination of the same image, by the weight of its message in relation to its own unassuming character. There is nothing *in the picture* that indicates its connection to the events of the Holocaust. In the picture Frieda is not emaciated or death-like. On the contrary, she looks very much alive and “normal.” She is firmly situated in an ordinary domestic setting: Sitting on a bench in front of a pretty house surrounded by flowering trees, she is holding a newspaper and smiling, shyly, at the camera. Very much alone, she seems to be asking something of the onlooker, as if beckoning to be recognized, to be helped perhaps, though I also see a distinct self-sufficiency in her expression. These contradictions are articulated by her posture: her body is twisted in on itself, uncomfortable at the edge of the seat. The newspaper is a curious prop — perhaps representing the public history which is the official alternative to the private memory she, as a witness, brings to her addressees. It is open on her lap, but she looks up at the camera instead. This picture has become for me a kind of emblem of the persona of the survivor who is at once set apart from the normalcy of postwar life and who eagerly awaits to rejoin it: in the picture, Frieda sits on the outside of the fence, she does not seem to be part of that house. She is the survivor who announces that she has literally “survived,” lived too long, outlived her intended destruction, the survivor who has a story to tell, but who has neither the space nor the audience to do so in the instantaneous flash of the photograph.

As much as the pictures in the Jakubowicz living room represented for me at once death and the timeless presence of the past, so Frieda’s picture says only “I am alive,” or perhaps, “I have survived” — a message so simple and, at the same time, so overlaid with meaning, that it seems to beg for a narrative and for a listener, for a survivor’s tale. Theorists of photography have often pointed out this simultaneous presence of death and life in the photograph. “Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people,” says Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (70). Following Sontag, Roland Barthes, in the most famous passage from *Camera Lucida*, insists that photography is also deeply connected to life:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.
From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which

ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body or the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (80, 81)

It is precisely the indexical nature of the photo, its status as relic, or trace, or fetish — its “direct” connection with the material presence of the photographed person — that intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life. In the image of the umbilical cord, Barthes connects the photo not just to life, but to life-giving, to maternity. Life is the presence of the object before the camera and the carnal medium of light which produces the image; death is the “having-been-there” of the object — the radical break, the finality introduced by the past tense. It is, for Barthes, the mother’s death. The “ça a été” of the photograph, as Barthes calls it, creates the scene of mourning shared by those who are left to look at the picture. This is what Barthes means when he identifies time itself as a sort of *punctum*: “I read at the same time *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence” (96). Nevertheless, Barthes insists that “the photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in the photograph)” (82); photography, he implies, does not facilitate the work of mourning. Marguerite Duras even says that “photographs promote forgetting. . . . It’s a confirmation of death” (89). “Not only is the photograph never, in essence a memory,” Barthes agrees, “but it blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (91). If, indeed, photography’s relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of memory, then what is it? What is the source of its power?

To elaborate on what Sontag calls the photograph’s “posthumous irony,” she describes Roman Vishniac’s pictures of the Lodz ghetto which are particularly affecting, she argues, because as we look at them we know how soon these people are going to die (70). We also know, I might add, that they will *all* die (have all died) and that their world will be destroyed and that the future’s (our) only access to it will be (is) through those pictures. The Holocaust photograph, I would like to argue, is uniquely

able to bring out this particular capacity of the photograph to hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists, to suggest both the desire or the necessity and, at the same time, the difficulty, or the impossibility, of mourning in the face of massive public trauma.

In the broad category of the "Holocaust photograph," I include the Jakubowicz's family photos, Frieda's picture, as well as Roman Vishniac's pictures of Lodz and the many pictures of atrocities that have come down to us from the concentration and extermination camps. I include those pictures which are connected to total death and to public mourning — both pictures of horror and ordinary snapshots or portraits, family pictures defined by their context as much as by their content. I recognize, of course, that there are differences between the picture of Frieda and the documentary images of mass graves, especially in the work of reading that goes into them. Confronted with the latter image, we respond with horror, even before looking at the caption or knowing the context of the image. Knowing that context then increases the horror, as we add to the bodies, or the hair, or the shoes depicted the millions which remain unrepresented. Confronted with the former image — the portrait or family picture — we need to know its context, but then, I would argue, we respond with a similar sense of disbelief. These two photographs, then, are complementary: It is precisely the displacement of the bodies depicted in the pictures of horror from their domestic settings, and their disfiguration, that brings home (as it were) the enormity of Holocaust destruction. And it is precisely the utter conventionality and generality of the domestic family picture that makes it impossible for us to comprehend how the person in the picture was, or could have been, exterminated. In both cases, the viewer fills in what the picture leaves out: The horror of looking is not necessarily *in* the image but in the story we provide to fill in what is left out of the image. For each image we provide the other, complementary one. "There was no stone that marked their passage," says Helen Epstein about her deceased relatives:

All that was left were the fading photographs that my father kept in a yellow envelope underneath his desk. Those photographs were not the usual kind of snapshots displayed in albums and shown to strangers. They were *documents*, evidence of our part in a history so powerful that whenever I tried to read about it in the books my father gave me or see

it in the films he took me to, I could not take it in. (11; emphasis added)

Epstein's statement illustrates the process of reading the Holocaust photograph: looking at the family pictures, placing them in context through reading and seeing films, being unable to understand or to name that context — note how Epstein repeats the indeterminate "it." Epstein's inability "to take *it* in" is perhaps the distinguishing feature of the Holocaust photograph.

I started thinking about the Jakubowicz's family pictures and their connection to the picture Frieda sent around to her relatives — pictures separated for me by twenty-five years — when I recently read Art Spiegelman's *Maus II*, the second volume of his controversial cartoon representation of his father's survival in Auschwitz. The first volume of *Maus* already contained one photograph of Art and his mother which, in the midst of Spiegelman's drawings of mice and cats, I had found particularly moving. But *Maus II* complicates the levels of representation and mediation of its predecessor. Seeing, on the first page, a photo of Artie's dead brother Richieu and, on the last page, the picture of the survivor Vladek Spiegelman in a starved camp uniform came to focus for me the oscillation between life and death that defines the photograph. These photographs connect the two levels of Spiegelman's text, the past and the present, the story of the father and the story of the son, because these family photographs are documents both of memory (the survivor's) and of what I would like to call post-memory (that of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth). As such, the photographs included in the text of *Maus*, and, through them, *Maus* itself, become what Pierre Nora has termed *lieux de mémoire*. "Created by a play of memory and history," *lieux de mémoire* are "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity, enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile." Invested with "a symbolic aura" *lieux de mémoire* can hope to "block the work of forgetting" (19).

I propose the term "post-memory" with some hesitation, conscious that the "post" prefix could carry the implication that we are beyond memory and therefore perhaps, as Nora fears, purely in history. Post-memory, in my reading, has certainly not taken us beyond memory, but is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it

as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination. I prefer post-memory to Nadine Fresco's "absent memory," also derived in her illuminating work with children survivors. Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated: It is as full and as empty as memory itself. Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory.

Like all pictures, the photos in *Maus* represent what no longer is. But they also represent what has been and what has been violently destroyed. And they represent the life that was no longer to be and that, against all odds, nevertheless continues to be. If anything throws this contradictory and ultimately unassimilable dimension of photography — its hovering between life and death — into full relief, it has to be the possibility, the reality, of survival in the face of the total death that is the Holocaust.

The status of the photographs in *Maus* is indeed defined by their context: Spiegelman's provocative generic choice of the comics and animal fable to represent his father's story of survival and his own life as a child of survivors. If since Theodor Adorno's 1949 essay "After Auschwitz," Holocaust representation has been determined by his suggestion that "after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems," then what can we say of Spiegelman's comics and of the photographs embedded in them?¹

Despite his own careful reconsiderations and restatements, Adorno's radical suspicion has haunted writing for the last forty years. One of its consequences has been an effort to distinguish between the documentary and the aesthetic. Most theoretical writing about holocaust representation, whether historical or literary, by necessity debates questions such as truth and fact, reference and representation, realism and modernism, history and fiction, ethics and politics — questions that may seem dated in theoretical thought, but that recent revisionist histories have brought to the fore with great urgency. Peter Haidu recently summarized this preoccupation: "Our grasp of the Event must inevitably be mediated by representations, with their baggage of indeterminacy. But this is a context in which theory is forced to reckon with reference — as unsatisfactory as contemporary accounts of reference may be — as a necessary function of language and all forms of representations" (294). The consequent validation of the documentary makes the archival photograph — along with spoken testimony — an especially powerful medium. Julia Kristeva has even argued that not only is film the "supreme art of the apocalyptic" but that the profusion of visual imagery in which we have been immersed since the Holocaust,

and its extraordinary power to evoke its horror, has silenced us verbally, impairing the symbolic instruments that might have enabled us to comprehend the apocalyptic events of our century:

For these monstrous and painful spectacles disturb our mechanisms of perception and representation. Our symbolic modes are emptied, petrified, nearly annihilated, as if they were overwhelmed or destroyed by an all too powerful force. . . . That new apocalyptic rhetoric has been realized in two extremes, which seem to be opposites but which often complement each other: the profusion of images and the withholding of the word. (139)

John E. Frohmayer, former chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts, goes further than Kristeva in the power with which he endows all documentary visual representation. He has claimed, for example, that Holocaust photographs are so upsetting that their public display needs to be strictly controlled:

Likewise, a photograph, for example of Holocaust victims might be inappropriate for display in the entrance of a museum where all would have to confront it, whether they chose to or not, but would be appropriate in a show which was properly labeled and hung so that only those who chose to confront the photographs would be required to do so. (qtd. in Liss 33)

Documentary images, to Frohmayer, are evidence. They hold up the “having-been-there” of the victim and the victimizer, of the horror. They remove doubt, they can be thrown in the face of revisionists. In contrast, the aesthetic is said to introduce agency, control, structure, and therefore distance from the real, a distance which could leave space for doubt. Art Spiegelman seems to confirm such a distinction when, contrary to his earlier ambition to write the “Great American Comic Book Novel” (“*Maus & Man*” 21), he recently insisted that *Maus* be classified as “non-fiction.”²

But some have questioned this distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic, highlighting the aestheticizing tendencies present in *all* visual representation and, therefore, its diminished power to convey horror. Christina von Braun, for example, decries the way in which the image — and she means the image in general — can “transform horror into the aesthetic,” suggesting that “film and the photograph have inserted themselves like a protective barrier between us and the real” (116, 118; my translation) becoming what she has aptly termed

a “photo morgana” (119). The immobilizing quality of the still photograph — its death-like fixing of one moment in time — clearly contributes to this perceived incapacity of the photo to maintain its initial power. After looking repeatedly at any image, the viewer builds up sufficient psychological resistance so as to become desensitized, to survive the horror of looking. In von Braun’s reading, this would be as true of a picture of atrocities as of the family picture of a child who later died in the gas chambers. For her, the photograph — in itself — can no more evoke horror than it can promote memory or facilitate the work of mourning. In placing three photographs in his graphic narrative, Art Spiegelman raises not only the question of how, forty years after Adorno’s dictum, the Holocaust can be represented, but also how different media — comics, photographs, narrative, testimony — can interact with each other to produce a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of Holocaust representation and definitively eradicate any clear-cut distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic. In taking us from documentary photographs to drawings of mice and cats, Spiegelman lays bare the levels of mediation that underlie *all* visual representational forms. But confronting these visual media with his father’s spoken testimony adds yet another axis to the oppositions between the documentary and the aesthetic, on the one hand, and testimony and fiction, on the other. Considering these two axes in a relation to one another might enable us to come back to the Holocaust photograph (and, through it, to photography more generally) and to look at its particular articulation of life and death, representation and mourning.

The title Spiegelman chose for his “survivor’s tale” illustrates well the interplay between the visual and aural codes that structure his texts. *Maus* sounds like mouse but its German spelling echoes visually the recurring Nazi command “*Juden raus*” (“Jews out” — come out or get out) as well as the first three letters of “*Auschwitz*,” a word that in itself has become an icon of the Holocaust. Spiegelman reinforces this association when, in the second volume, he refers to the camp as “*Mauschwitz*” and boldly entitles his first chapter: “*From Mauschwitz to the Catskills and Beyond*.” Similarly, Spiegelman’s subtitle plays with the visual and aural dimensions of the word “*tale*” — when we see it, we know it means “*story*,” but when we hear it after hearing “*mouse*” we might think that it is spelled t-a-i-l. One could even go further and say that the author uses his own name, never capitalized on his title pages, as though it were a visual construct

able to bring out the tensions between the aesthetic and the documentary, the figural and the mimetic: “art,” on the one hand, and “spiegelman” or “mirror-man,” on the other. Spiegelman’s audacious visual/verbal punning not only lays bare the self-consciousness of his textual production — a self-reflexivity that disarmingly pervades his text — it also defines from the beginning the two primary elements of his representational choices, the visual and the aural.

On one level, *Maus* tells the story of Artie’s father, Vladek, from the 1930s in Poland to his liberation from Auschwitz in 1945; on another level, *Maus* recounts the story of father and son in 1980s Queens and the Catskills, the story of the father’s testimony and the son’s attempt to transmit that testimony in the comics genre which has become his profession, and the story of Artie’s own life dominated by memories that are not his own. As Art visits Vladek at his home, in his workshop, or on his vacations, as they sit, or walk, or work, or argue, Vladek talks into a tape recorder and Art asks him questions, follows up on details, demands more minute descriptions. The testimony is contained in Vladek’s voice, but we receive more than that voice: we receive Art’s graphic interpretations of Vladek’s narrative. This is a “survivor’s tale” — a testimony — mediated by the child of this survivor through his own idiosyncratic representational and aesthetic choices.³ These choices are at once based on an almost obsessive desire for accuracy and the clear abandonment (or refiguration) of that desire in the choice of the animal fable. On the one hand, then, the tape recorder captures Vladek’s story *as he tells it*, and the texts at least give us the impression that Art has transcribed the testimony verbatim, getting the accent, the rhythm, the intonation just right. On the other hand, Art has not provided the visual counterpart of the tape recorder — the camera. Instead, he has drawn the Jews as mice, the Poles as pigs, the Germans as cats, the French as frogs, Americans as dogs, the gypsies as lady bugs. It seems that in the aural realm, Spiegelman seeks absolute unmediated authenticity, while in the visual, he chooses multiple mediations. But the three photos that are reproduced complicate considerably this apparent disjunction between the visual and aural.⁴

At first glance, Spiegelman’s animal fable is a literalization of Hitler’s line which serves as its epigraph: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human.” If indeed, Jews are not human, Spiegelman seems to ask, what are they, and, more importantly, what are the Germans? In response, he draws schematic mice and cat heads resting on human-looking bodies. But

these are mice and cats who perceive themselves as human, who in all respects except one — their heads — are human. When Anja Spiegelman (his mother) discovers a rat in the basement where she is hiding, she is terrified, and Art is amused when he finds a framed photo of a pet cat on the desk of his survivor psychiatrist. Spiegelman would like, it would seem, to make it clear throughout his books that his representational choices are just that — choices — and that identities are assumed rather than given. When Vladek gets out of hiding to walk through Sosnowiek, he wears a pig mask, trying to pass for Polish. Some children call him a Jew, but the adults believe the mask and apologize). Art has trouble deciding how to draw his French wife, Françoise — should she be a frog because she is French, or a mouse because she converted to Judaism (fig. 1)? Yet Spiegelman seems to come close to duplicating the Nazi's racist refusal of the possibility of assimilation or cultural integration when he represents different nationalities as different animal species. In *Maus II* these dichotomous attitudes blur. Art often represents himself not as a mouse but as a human wearing the mask of a mouse. Eventually, as he starts to draw and gets into his father's story, the mouse head becomes his own head. If Jews are mice and Germans are cats, then, they seem to be so not immutably but only *in relation to each other* and in relation to the Holocaust and its memory. They are human but for the predator/victim relationships between them. Yet the Vermont friends of Art and Françoise are dogs, even in the 1980s.

Obviously, Spiegelman's reflections on "race," ethnicity, and nationality as essential (natural) or as socially and ideologically constructed contain a number of contradictions and incongruities, and over the years of the two books' production, they have evolved. This evolution can be traced in the differences between his first self-portrait and the one he adopted in *Maus II* (figs. 2 and 3). In the first, the cartoonist is a hybrid creature, with a man's body and a mouse head, a lonely artist at his drawing table with his back to the viewer. In the second, the artist is simply a man wearing a mouse head which he anxiously holds in his hands as, facing out, he sadly contemplates his work. No longer isolated, he is surrounded both by the world of his imagination (a Nazi guard is shooting outside his window) and of his craft (a picture of *Raw* and the cover of *Maus* are on the wall). Entering his book has become more problematic and overlaid for Spiegelman, the access to his mouse identity more mediated. Spiegelman's animal fable is both more and less than an analysis of national and ethnic relations: it is his aesthetic strategy.



Figure 1

At the same time, readers and viewers raised on “Mickey Mouse,” “Tom and Jerry,” and, Spiegelman’s favorite, *Mad*, quickly come to accept the convention of the animal fable and learn to discern subtle facial and bodily expressions among the characters of *Maus* even though the figures’ faces rarely vary significantly. Even the breaks in illusion that multiply in *Maus II* do not interfere with our suspension of disbelief. We learn to appreciate Art’s self-consciousness, his questions about the valid-



Figure 2



Figure 3

ity of his enterprise and his capacity to carry it out, and we sympathize with his discomfort at the success of *Maus*. Art, drawn as a mouse, or wearing his mouse mask, is a figure to whom we have become accustomed. Even the incongruity, the uneasy fit, between the characters' heads and their bodies, and the book's confusions about the nature of racial and ethnic difference, even the monumental and pervasive dissonance between the past and present levels of the narrative (Vladek describing his deportation while riding his exercise bicycle in Queens, for example) all ultimately come to be normalized, even erased, in the reading process.

The really shocking and disturbing breaks in the visual narrative — the points that fail to blend in — are the actual photographs and the one moment in which the drawing style and

convention changes: the section called “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” in *Maus* and the two photos in *Maus II*. These three moments protrude from the narrative like unassimilated and unassimilable memories. In *Maus*, for example, the “Prisoner” section literally sticks out because of its black pages which disturb the uniformly white aspect of the closed book. In *Maus II*, Spiegelman sets off the two photos through contrast: they emerge through their difference not only from the narrative itself, but also from several pages where “photographs” — schematic representations of framed mice — are shown and discussed by Vladek: “Anja’s parents, the grandparents, her big sister Tosha, little Bibi and our Richieu. . . . All what is left, it’s the photos” (*Maus II* 113-16) (fig. 4). When we get to the actual photographs of Richieu and Vladek, they “break out of the framework” of Spiegelman’s book as much as the black pages of the prisoner section did. And in doing so, they bring into relief a tension that is always there, on every level of the text.

“Breaking out of the framework” is a term Shoshana Felman uses in her book on *Testimony*, where she recounts how in a course on the literature of testimony, the screening of videotaped interviews with Holocaust survivors “broke through the framework” of her course just as all the writers of testimony ended up breaking through the framework of the books they had initially set out to write (48). Felman sees what she calls this “dissonance” as essential to her pedagogical experience in the age of testimony. “Breaking through the frame” is a form of “dissonance” — visual *and* verbal images are used to describe an incongruity necessary to any writing or teaching about the Holocaust. How are we to read the radical breaks in the representational continuity of *Maus*? How do Spiegelman’s family pictures mediate his narrative of loss? What alternate story — in the margins of the central narrative of *Maus* — is told by the family pictures?

Taken together, the three photographs in *Maus I* and *II* reassemble a family violently fractured and destroyed by the *shoah*: they include, at different times, in different places and in different guises, all the Spiegelmans — Art and his mother, Art’s brother Richieu, and finally Vladek. Distributed over the space of the two volumes, these three photographs tell their own narrative of loss, mourning, and desire, one that inflects obliquely, both supports and undercuts the story of *Maus* itself.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman includes a photograph of Artie and his mother labeled “Trojan Lake, N.Y. 1958” (100). They are obviously vacationing — the ten-year-old Art is squatting in a field,



Figure 4

smiling at the camera, and Anja is standing above him, wearing a bathing suit, one hand on his head, staring into space (fig. 5). Presumably, the picture is taken by the invisible father: a conventional division of labor in 1950s family pictures. But the narrative's next frame immediately announces the brutal breakup of this interconnected family group: "In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note." Poignantly, Spiegelman juxtaposes the archival photograph with the mes-



Figure 5

sage of death which, through the presence of the photo's "having-been-there," is strengthened, made even more unbearable.

The drawings in the "Hell Planet" section are totally different from the rest of the volume: not only are they drawings of humans rather than of mice and cats, but they express grief and pain in much more direct, melodramatic, expressionist fashion — tears running down faces, skulls confronting the viewer, Vladek lying on top of the casket screaming "Anna." Art himself is dressed in the striped concentration camp uniform that has come down to him through his parents' stories: he thereby metaphorically equates his own confinement in his guilt and mourning with their imprisonment in the concentration camp. Hell Planet is both Auschwitz and Art's own psyche. "Left alone with [his] thoughts," Art connects "MENOPAUSAL DEPRESSION, HITLER DID IT, MOMMY, and BITCH" (*Maus* 103) — memory is unbearable and, in his representational choices, Spiegelman tries to convey just how unbearable it is. "Hell Planet" demonstrates how immediately present the war memories of his parents are for them and for Art — and how unassimilated. But the grieving Art does not literally remember the concentration camp whose uniform he wears; mediated through his parents' memories, his is what we may call a "post-memory." Art remains imprisoned in his camp uniform and in the black-bordered spaces of his psyche — drawing *Maus*, it is implied, represents for him an attempt both to get deeper into his post-memory and to find a way out. In "Hell Planet" the two chronological levels of *Maus* merge, and in this convergence between past and present, destruction and survival — incarnated by Anja's suicide — lies the root of Art's (perhaps temporary) insanity. But in this merg-

ing, this segment merely exacerbates what occurs at every level of *Maus*; Art's stay at the mental institution in "Hell Planet" is merely a more pronounced version of the insanity he lives through every day of his post-memory life.

The other characters attest to the power of "Hell Planet." Mala, Vladek's second wife, insists it is unlike other comics because it is "so personal" but "very accurate . . . objective" too (104). Vladek says he only read it because it contained Anja's picture, and he says that he cried when he read it because it brought back memories of his wife (*Maus* 104). Vladek keeps his wife's memory alive through the pictures of her he has all over his desk which, as his second wife complains, is "like a shrine." The Trojan Lake photo of mother and son sets the stage for the personal, as well as the objective, realistic, and accurate — it legitimizes "Hell Planet" as a document of life and death, of death in life. In the photo, mother and son are interconnected by her arm which touches the top of his head; but the photo itself is, in Barthes's terms, a carnal medium, connecting the viewer (Art, Mala, and Vladek, as well as the reader of *Maus*) with the living Anja who stood in front of the camera in 1958, connected to her son. In each case, hands become the media of interconnection: Anja places her hand on Art's head, a hand (presumably Art's) is holding the photo at an angle at the top of the page, and Art's hand is holding the pages of "Hell Planet" as they are represented in *Maus*. The reader's access to Anja and her story is multiply mediated by Art's hands and hers — his drawing hand stands in stark contrast to her arm on which (unrevealed in the photograph) was what, in another text, Spiegelman says she always tried to hide: her tattooed Auschwitz number ("Mad Youth").⁵

Anja left no note — all that remains is her picture, her hand on Art's head, their bodily attachment and his memories of her, transformed into drawings. It is a picture modulated by other memories, such as the one in "Hell Planet" of Anja asking Artie, in the only speech of hers that he remembers directly (the others are all mediated by his father), whether he still loves her. He turns away, refuses to look at her, "resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord" (!) and says "sure, Ma." In guilty recollection all Art can say is "Agh!" (*Maus* 103).

But *Maus* is dominated by this absence of Anja's voice, the destruction of her diaries, her missing note. Anja is recollected by others, she remains a visual and not a verbal presence. She speaks in sentences imagined by her son, recollected by her husband. As a memory she is mystified, objectified, shaped to the

needs and desires of the one who remembers — whether it be Vladek or Art. Her actual voice could have been in the text, but it isn't: "These notebooks, and other really nice things of mother," Vladek explains to Art, "One time I had a very bad day . . . and all of these things I destroyed." "You what?" Art exclaims. "After Anja died I had to make an order with everything . . . these papers had too many memories, so I burned them" (*Maus* 158). Vladek did not read the papers Anja left behind, he only knows that she said: "I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this" (*Maus* 159). This legacy was destroyed, and *Maus* itself can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct it, an attempt by father and son to provide the missing perspective of the mother. Much of the text rests on her absence and the destruction of her papers, deriving from her silence its momentum and much of its energy. Through her picture and her missing voice Anja haunts the story told in both volumes.

"Prisoner in Hell Planet" was initially published in an underground journal and, in *Maus*, Art says he never intended for his father to see it. "Prisoner" is Art's own recollection, but *Maus* is the collaborative narrative of father and son: one provides most of the verbal narrative, the other the visual; one gives testimony while the other receives and transmits it. In the process of testimony they establish their own uneasy bonding. In his analysis of the process of testimony, the psychoanalyst Dori Laub says:

For lack of a better term, I will propose that there is a need for a tremendous libidinal investment in those interview situations: there is so much destruction recounted, so much death, so much loss, so much hopelessness, that there has to be an abundance of holding and of emotional investment in the encounter, to keep alive the witnessing narration. (Felman and Laub 71)

Art and Vladek share one monumental loss, Anja's, and on that basis, they build the "libidinal investment" demanded by the "witnessing narration" they undertake.⁶

But Anja's role in their familial construction makes Art and Vladek's collaboration a process of masculine, Orphic creation, in the terms of Klaus Theweleit's *Buch der Könige*. Art and Vladek do indeed sing an Orphic song — a song about the internal workings of a Hades which few have survived, and fewer still have been able to speak about. In Theweleit's terms, Orphic creation — the birth of human art forms, social institutions, and technological inventions — results from such a descent into Hades and

a reemergence from it: a masculine process facilitated by the encounter with the beautiful dead woman who cannot herself come out and sing her own song. Orphic creation is thus an artificial “birth” produced by men — by male couples able to bypass the generativity of women, male couples whose bonding depends on the tragic absence of women. In this process, women play the role of “media” in Theweleit’s sense, of intermediaries, not of primary creators or witnesses. In *Maus*, father and son together attempt to reconstruct the missing story of the mother, and by extension, the story of women in Auschwitz. They do not go to Mala, Vladek’s second wife for assistance, even though she too is a survivor. Mala, in fact, is disturbingly absent as a voice and even as a listener in the two volumes. When she tries to tell parts of her own story of survival, Art interrupts to go check on his father. Her role is to take care of the aging Vladek and to put up with his unpleasantness. Moreover, Mala brings us face to face with the limitations of the book’s fairy tale mode, with its polarization of mice and cats, good guys and bad: her name “mala” emphasizes her position as foil to the idealized, deceased Anja and sets her up, at least symbolically, as the evil stepmother. And Art leaves her in that role even when he seems to consult with her about Vladek. He never sympathizes with her or listens to her. Françoise, Art’s French wife, is also a mere sounding board for the confused cartoonist. In his acknowledgments, Spiegelman thanks both women for their roles as “media”: Mala was his translator from Polish and Françoise, his editor. Art’s hostile comments about dating Jewish women complete the process of banishing female voices from his narrative and basing his story, in Orphic fashion, on female absence and death. Art and Vladek perform the collaboration of the creative male couple: the difficulties that structure their relationship only serve to strengthen the ties which bind them to each other and to the labor they have undertaken.

But in the Orpheus story, we should recall, Orpheus may not turn around to *look* at Eurydice’s face. In “Hell Planet,” Spiegelman draws Anja and even hands us her photograph — Anja’s face and body, connected to the body of her son, is there for everyone to see. Seeing her photograph is an act of “memento mori”: her picture a sign of the “having been,” of Anja’s one-time presence and of her subsequent, perpetual, and devastating absence. The photograph is the visual equivalent of the Orphic song which, through the intermediary of a cultural artifact — *Maus* — can bring Eurydice out of Hades, even as it actually needs to leave her behind. Thus the photograph — the product

of both the aesthetic and the documentary/technological — signals this dual presence and absence, in Barthes's terms, this "anterior future of which death is the stake" (96).

While "Prisoner" is the work of memory, *Maus* itself is the art of "post-memory." This, in fact, is the status of the two photographs in *Maus II*. The second volume carries two dedications: "For Richieu and for Nadja." Richieu is the brother Art never knew because he died during the war, before Art's birth; Nadja is Spiegelman's daughter. The volume is dedicated to two children, one dead, the other alive, one who is the object of post-memory, the other who will herself carry on the legacy of her father's post-memory. Whose picture, in fact, illustrates the dedication page (fig. 6)? I have assumed that it is Richieu's — a serious, about three-year-old child with parted hair and wearing what looks like knit overalls. But, upon reflection, the picture is quite indeterminate. Could it be Nadja? Could it be a childhood image of Vladek, I wonder, noting the resemblance between the two pictures which frame *Maus II*? Or could it be Art himself? A few pages into *Maus II*, Art alludes to a photograph of his "ghost-brother" even as he wonders if they would have gotten along: "He was mainly a large blurry photograph hanging in my parents' bedroom." Françoise is surprised: "I thought that was a picture of *you*, though it didn't look like you" (15). From its appearance, the photograph could be of Art or Vladek or Nadja or Richieu — Spiegelman does not specify. But in terms of its function, the photograph in the bedroom and the one on the

F O R R I C H I E U



A N D F O R N A D J A

Figure 6

dedication page clearly has to be of Richieu. Art comments, "That's the point, They didn't need photos of me in their room, I was alive! The photo never threw tantrums or got into any kind of trouble. . . . It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete" (15). This photograph signifies death and loss, even while, as a kind of "fetish object," it disavows loss. The parents keep it in their bedroom to refer to, Art competes with it, and we take it as the ultimately unassimilable fact that it is of a child who died unnaturally, before he had the chance to live.

The child who could not survive to live his own life — especially in his equivalence with Art and Nadja — becomes the emblem of the incomprehensibility of Holocaust destruction. In a recent book entitled *Children with a Star*, Debórah Dwork quotes a chilling statistic: in Nazi-occupied Europe, only eleven percent of Jewish children survived the war years (xxxiii). Richieu was poisoned by the aunt who hid him so that he might be saved; she poisoned him so that he might not suffer in the death camps. Art reports, "After the war my parents traced down the vaguest rumors, and went to orphanages all over Europe. They couldn't believe he was dead" (*Maus II* 15). The indeterminacy of the dedication photograph makes it so that we cannot believe it either — this child could be any of us. In its anonymity, this photograph, and many others like it, connects to the anonymity of the victims and corpses represented in photographs of concentration and extermination camps. At the end of the volume, Art becomes Richieu, and Richieu takes on the role of listener and addressee of Vladek's testimony, a testimony addressed to the dead and the living: "So," Vladek says as he turns over in his bed, "Let's stop please your tape recorder. I'm tired from talking Richieu and it's enough stories for now" (*Maus II* 136). Richieu is both a visual presence and a listener — and, as he and Art merge to transmit the tale, he is neither. The child's photograph, visible in other frames of Vladek's bedroom, itself becomes the ultimate witness to Vladek's survivor's tale. In this role, Richieu, or Richieu's photograph, can confirm the interminable nature of the mourning in *Maus*, and the endlessness of Vladek's tale, a tale subtitled "And here my troubles began." This is a phrase Spiegelman picks up from Vladek's narrative, an ironic aside about Auschwitz. Reading *Maus II* we realize not only that his troubles began long before, but that they (and his son's) never end.

If the child's photograph at the beginning of this volume is the emblem of incomprehensible and unacceptable death, Vladek's photograph at the end, is intended as a sign of life to

reconnect the lost Vladek and Anja after the liberation. “Anja guess what! A letter from your husband just came.” “He’s in Germany. . . . He’s had typhus! . . . And here’s a picture of him! My God — Vladek is really alive!” (*Maus II* 134). Reproduced in the next frame, but at a slant, jumping out of the frame, is a photograph of the young Vladek, serious but pleasant, standing in front of a curtain, wearing a starched striped camp uniform and hat (fig. 7). He explains the picture: “I passed once a photo place what had a *camp* uniform — a new and clean one — to make *souvenir* photos.” Just as Vladek keeps pictures of the deceased Anja on his desk, he asserts that “Anja kept this picture always.” The photograph which signifies life and survival is as important, as cherished, as the one signaling loss and death. But this photograph is particularly disturbing in that it *stages, performs* the identity of the camp inmate. Vladek wears a uniform in a souvenir shop in front of what looks like a stage curtain; he is no longer in the camp but he reenacts his inmate self even as he is trying to prove — through his ability to pose — that he survived the inmate’s fate.

In Anja’s eyes, the uniform would not call into question the picture’s message: “I am alive, I have survived.” She last saw Vladek in Auschwitz, and she would certainly have noticed the



Figure 7

difference between this clean uniform and the one he must actually have worn. The uniform would signal to her their common past, their survival, perhaps hope for a future. It is a picture Vladek could only have sent to *her* — anyone else might have misunderstood its performative aspect. For readers of *Maus*, this picture plays a different role: it situates itself on a continuum of representational choices, from the authenticity of the photos, to the drawings of humans in “Hell Planet,” to the mice masks, to the drawings of mice themselves. This photograph is both documentary evidence (Vladek was in Auschwitz) and it isn’t (the picture was taken in a souvenir shop). This picture may look like a documentary photograph of the inmate — it may have the appearance of authenticity — but it is merely, and admittedly, a simulation, a dress-up game. The identity of Vladek, the camp survivor, with the man wearing the camp uniform in the picture is purely coincidental. Anyone could have had this picture taken in the same souvenir shop — any of us could have, just as perhaps any of us could be wearing uniforms in our dreams, as Art is. Certainly, any of us can wear the horizontally striped shirts Françoise seems to favor (another visual pun?), which only further blurs the lines between document and performance. Yet, like Helen Epstein’s family pictures, Vladek’s photo is also a very particular kind of document, appropriate to a history we cannot “take in.”

Breaking out of the frame, looking intently at the viewer/reader, Vladek’s picture dangerously relativizes the identity of the survivor. As listeners of his testimony, as viewers of Art’s translation and transmission of that testimony, we are invited to imagine ourselves inside that picture. Like Frieda’s picture, Vladek’s, with all its incongruous elements, suggests a story. *Maus* is the story elaborated from this photograph of the survivor. With Art and with Vladek, the reader is in what Laub calls “the testimonial chain”:

Because trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on the witness. Testimony is the narrative’s address to hearing. . . . As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is no simple task. . . . In the center of this massive dedicated effort remains a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing. (Felman and Laub 71-73)

Maus represents the aesthetic of the trauma fragment, the aesthetic of the testimonial chain — an aesthetic that is indistinguishable from the documentary. It is composed of individually framed fragments, each like a still picture imbricated in a border that is closed off from the others. These frames are nevertheless connected to one another in the very testimonial chain that relates the two separate chronological levels, the past and the present, that structure the narrative of *Maus*. But, once in a while,



— art spiegelman — 1978-1991

Figure 8

something breaks out of the rows of frames, or out of the frames themselves, upsetting and disturbing the structure of the entire work. The fragments that break out of the frames are details that function like Barthes's *punctum*; they have the power of the "fetish" to signal and to disavow an essential loss. And embedded in those fragments — in spite of the conventional fairy tale ending of the second volume where Vladek and Anja are reunited and Vladek insists that "we were both very happy and lived happy, happy ever after" (136), in spite of the tombstone that enshrines their togetherness and establishes a seemingly normalized closure — the nightmare, the fragility, the woundedness remain (fig. 8). The power of the photographs Spiegelman includes in *Maus* lies not in their evocation of memory, in the connection they can establish between present and past, but in their status as fragments of a history we cannot take in.

Maus is subtitled "My Father Bleeds History" and the book shows us that this bleeding, in Laub's terms, "defies all healing." In the words of the subtitle to the second volume, "And Here My Troubles Began" — his "troubles" never end. I have tried to argue that the three photographs in *Maus*, and the complicated marginal narrative of unassimilable loss that they tell, perpetuate what remains in the two volumes as an incongruity appropriate to the aesthetic of the child of survivors, the aesthetic of post-memory.⁷

Notes

¹ I have deliberately quoted only that part of Adorno's sentence which has become so determinative and familiar. The entire sentence reads: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (362). In his later essay, "Commitment" (1962), Adorno further elaborates his thoughts: "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. . . . Yet this suffering . . . also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (Arato 312). But this seeming reversal of his original injunction is subject to further rethinking later in the essay: "The esthetic principle of stylization . . . makes an unthinkable fate appear to have some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. . . . Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation" (313).

² But the Pulitzer Prize committee invented a special category for *Maus*, suggesting the impossibility of categorizing it as either “fiction” or “non-fiction.” As Lawrence Langer says in his review of *Maus II*: “It resists defining labels” (1).

³ See Alice Kaplan’s comparison of *Maus* as the text of the child of survivors to Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies* as the text of the child of the perpetrators.

⁴ See Nancy K. Miller’s account of the 1992 “Maus” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art where some of Vladek’s tapes could be heard. Miller analyzes the levels of mediation and transformation that separate the father’s voice from the son’s text.

⁵ In this *Life* piece, Spiegelman describes another snapshot in which the eleven-year-old Art and his mother sit on their back porch looking at an issue of *Mad*: “You can’t see my mother’s left forearm behind the magazine. She usually wears a broad gold bracelet — Vladek gives them to her as birthday and anniversary gifts — to cover the blue Auschwitz number tattooed above her wrist. On occasion my friends have noticed the number and have asked her about it. She explains it’s a phone number she doesn’t want to forget.”

⁶ See also Nancy Miller’s incisive analysis of the missing mother’s story as the basis for the father/son relationship in *Maus*.

⁷ I am grateful for the valuable suggestions I received at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the Belle van Zuylen Institute at the University of Amsterdam, and the Johns Hopkins University where I presented this paper. I would also like to thank Carol Bardenstein, Larry Kritzman, Nancy Miller, Ivy Schweitzer, Leo Spitzer, Carol Tennessen, Kathleen Woodward, and Susanne Zantop for their careful readings of this manuscript.

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