

Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus. A Look inside a Modern Classic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), pp. 299 & DVD.

by *Federico Damonte*

MetaMaus: a contemporary *midrash*

Why *MetaMaus*?

Pay attention to the look and feel of any book by Art Spiegelman: a lover of books as objects, a typographic enthusiast who used to run his own press in his apartment together with his wife Françoise Mouly, also an expert on printing and publishing, he once befuddled a whole party of well-known authors by asking them whether they preferred three-piece or one-piece binding. Of course, none of them knew what he was talking about¹. His books always have their own specific typographical personality, from the exact replicas of his sketchbooks in *Be a nose!* to the out of size cardboard pages of *In the Shadow of no Towers*².

MetaMaus introduces itself to us with a prominent hole in the hard cover, right in the place of the only visible eye of the well-known image of Spiegelman as a chain-smoking mouse. The hole reveals a swastika with a Hitler's cat face on the first page of the book, which in turn fills the hole at the centre of the accompanying DVD, tucked inside the back of the cover. Impressive as it is, the ingenious piece of publishing craftsmanship is not the most important, or rather revealing, aspect of *MetaMaus*: just by a quick browsing – which should always precede the actual reading – one notices that at the end of the book the pages are published on a different, darker, paper, and that the text is formatted differently. This section has no pictures, as opposed to the extensive visual documentation of the preceding chapters. This section contains the transcript of the long interviews that the author had with his father, Vladek Spiegelman, and that form the basis of the story in *Maus*. It is this stratification, I argue, that gives us a key to the understanding of *MetaMaus*.

Because *MetaMaus* is not an easily classifiable book. It is definitely *not* a “critical companion” to *Maus*, and while it is incredibly rich in information is also very difficult to navigate as a reference book. Spiegelman says that the publisher, Viking, was not able to write the back cover description, and his wife Françoise had to do it³. Furthermore, its usual place on bookshop shelves, next to *Maus*, raises a rather obvious question: why another book by Spiegelman about *Maus*? Is not everything one needs to know about *Maus* explained in *Maus* itself?

¹ Interview with *Publishers Weekly*, available at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/book-news/comics/article/49046-art-spiegelman-on-the-future-of-the-book.html>

² Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Viking, 2004; *Be a Nose!*, McSweeney's, 2009.

³ Interview with *The Comics Journal*, available at <http://www.tcj.com/an-art-spiegelman-interview/>.

Remember that *Maus* contains *two* different stories: a story in the 'past' about how Vladek survived Auschwitz, and a story in the 'present', in which 'Artie' interviews his father about his war-time experiences. The 'present' story-line provides ample commentary about memory, representation, trauma and its transmission, and other unescapable problems related to the narration of life in the death camps. It is one of *Maus*'s great merits that it discusses in depth its own goals and methods while at the same time providing the reader with a thoroughly engaging narration. More generally, no other modern graphic novel has less need to justify or explain its existence: like other books about the Holocaust, its goal is to bear witness, and by universal consensus *Maus* does so in a way rarely achieved in the literature about the death camps. In this sense *Maus* is indeed a modern classic. So, again, why a book about *Maus* by the author of *Maus*?

The stated answer to this question is found (in cartoon form) right at the beginning of the book: according to it, Spiegelman saw this book as an opportunity to provide conclusive answers to the recurring questions thrown at him every time he is asked about *Maus*: why the Holocaust? Why mice? Why comics? I, for one, am not entirely convinced by this explanation: these obvious questions have been repeatedly addressed by Spiegelman himself in numerous interviews, and extensively discussed in a critical literature which by now is so vast it is difficult even to survey⁴. I propose a more far-ranging reason: *MetaMaus* is the attempt by the author of *Maus* to explain and defend the ways in which he dealt with the fundamental problems posed by telling a story about Auschwitz. These can be reduced to the problem of how not to betray history, *that* history, by narrating it in an artistic form, the problem posed by Adorno in his famous dictum that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"⁵. As Spiegelman says in several interviews, *MetaMaus* is his effort to be as honest and transparent as possible about his goals, reasons and methods, to provide the ultimate answer to those who objected to, for instance, the mice and cats metaphor, or the very use of comics as a medium to tell the story of a death camp survivor. In the author's words, *MetaMaus* aims at showing all the constituent elements of *Maus*, so that the reader can go and make his own *Maus*⁶.

In this, *MetaMaus* cannot but be regarded a complete success: this has to be the most exhaustive and in-depth examination of a graphic novel ever produced. It reaches its goal by focussing strictly on the creative process behind *Maus*, and by producing all the visual and historical evidence needed to understand that process. Such a vast material is organised in an amazingly simple way: the book consists of a long interview with the author by Hilary

⁴ The reader is referred to Geis, Deborah R. (ed.) *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's tale" of the Holocaust*, University of Alabama Press, 2007 and the references quoted there.

⁵ The relevance of this quote to *Maus* is discussed by Chute in an essay on the accompanying DVD: *The Shadow of a Past Time*.

⁶ See for instance the interview quoted in fn. 3.

Chute, divided into three chapters, corresponding to the three questions mentioned above: why the Holocaust? Why mice? Why comics? This is all the structure there is to such a wide-ranging collection of material. Credit must be given to Chute's lucid and thorough questioning and to Spiegelman's thoughtful and well-argued answers to provide a coherent and interesting discussion. The text is illustrated by all the visual material mentioned in the interview, and more. As mentioned above, the book includes transcripts of Spiegelman's taped conversations with his father Vladek, and interviews with the members of his family: his wife Françoise, his son Dash and his daughter Anja. On the DVD we find a complete version of *Maus*, with each page and panel hyperlinked to sketches, notes and passages of Vladek's narration. True to its aim of presenting all constituent elements of *Maus*, the DVD rounds off all this material with a vast *genizah* (the DVD itself calls it a *midrash*) of *Maus* documents: the audio files of the interviews with Vladek, the home-made film of the Spiegelmans' research trip to Auschwitz, the first reviews of the (then still on-going) *Maus* series, and essays by Chute and Spiegelman himself.

By now the reader might well suspect that all this extra material is just useless filler for comic book fans, but that conclusion would not be justified. The heterogenous documents presented in *MetaMaus* do add up to a single, coherent, reading experience, but one needs some directions to navigate it without getting lost. The starting point are the transcripts of Vladek's interviews, found at the end of the book. The next logical step is to listen to the recorded interviews on the DVD, and be awed by the assured sound of Vladek's voice, and his authoritative broken English⁷. Finally, one has to go back to *Maus*, and rediscover it through the hyperlinked pages on the DVD. To say that the process adds to our understanding and enjoyment of *Maus* would be an understatement. The whole experience really does make the reader feel he is witnessing the creation of *Maus* before his own eyes. What is missing from this experience is the actual process of bringing *Maus* into existence, a lonely, laborious, 13-year long task. This is most effectively reconstructed in the interview.

What does it take to write a *Maus*?

Any “meta” book aspires to give us an insight into the creative process, and *MetaMaus* succeeds exceedingly well in it. In particular, this book healthily corrects the distorted view that literary works have a life of their own and can be explained by discussions about genres influences and literary aims. *MetaMaus* reminds us of the degree of commitment and dedication necessary to produce a work of the complexity and length of *Maus*. Spiegelman invites us to write our own *Maus*, but what did it take *him* to write *his*?

⁷ This fundamental aspect of *Maus* is easily overlooked. For an insightful analysis, see A. Rosen, “The Language of Survival: English as Metaphor in Spiegelman's *Maus*”, *Prooftexts: a Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 15-3, (September 1995), pp. 249 – 262.

The list is fairly impressive: first, a steady job, drawing trading cards for the *Topps* bubble-gum company. Then, personal stability, and therefore a wife – yes, Spiegelman publicly says that he married in order to have the stability needed to focus on his creative work⁸. Clarity of purpose: according to Françoise, his world view was fully formed when she met him in 1976⁹. Sheer determination: his previous book, *Breakdowns*¹⁰, had no sales or reviews, and *Maus* was rejected by many publishers before being accepted by Viking¹¹.

The actual writing procedure is no less impressive: six steps from the recorded interviews to the finished page, each one requiring a decision about what to say, what to elide and how to say what is being said. Just imagine all the work and effort needed to turn a single first-person narrative into short dialogues written in small balloons. All this while striving to concentrate as much information as possible in every single page. As important as the working process, though, was the awareness that the author of such a story has to be in complete service to the story itself: Spiegelman explains that a recurring problem was not to overwhelm the story with displays of graphic and story-telling ability. A clear example is discussed on p. 143, which shows an impressive study into scratchboard technique. That experiment was abandoned, though, because “it insisted on my superiority to the reader”. This conclusion is even more compelling if we think that it comes from a cartoonist well-known for his radically experimental approach to comics.

But being inservice to the story does not always mean taking away, it also means adding, most importantly, adding the 'present' story-line to show the whole working process behind the story, the very act of remembering and analysing those memories, without which the story would have been “fraudulent” (p. 208). Vladek is not telling his story directly, and it is important that this is made clear to the reader. Throughout *MetaMaus* Spiegelman repeats that “the subject of *Maus* is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory”. Because the story of *Maus* is not that of a death-camp survivor having problems with his son, but “it's about a cartoonist trying to envision what his father went through” (p. 73)¹².

Writing *Maus* also required a huge amount of research, in a time where there was no internet, and non-academic material on the holocaust was not so common as now. Furthermore, as Spiegelman explains, the fact that *Maus* was

⁸ *MetaMaus*, p. 91.

⁹ *MetaMaus*, p. 92.

¹⁰ Nostalgia Press, 1977.

¹¹ See the collection of rejection letters reproduced on p. 76 – 78.

¹² Even today, the importance of memory and authorship in writing about the Holocaust is far from being universally understood. A clear example among graphic novels is *Auschwitz: Une bande dessinée*, by Pascal Croci (Editions du Masque, 2000). In this book a past story about Auschwitz is framed by a present storyline set in modern-day war-torn Yugoslavia, and explicit parallels are made between the two stories. Needless to say, the decision to add a second, different, and fictional story on top of an equally fictional story about Auschwitz goes into exactly the opposite direction of Spiegelman's choice to dismantle and reveal the whole authorial process behind *Maus*.

written in cartoon form obliged him to look for visual references of all the places and buildings mentioned in the story. It is perhaps the most overlooked factor in the working process behind *Maus*. Spiegelman quotes an academic paper about the perils of oral history that supposedly pointed out a factual mistake: the toilets in Vladek's cabin are drawn like real water-closets, with plumbing, and not like long wooden planks, the image universally associated with the death camps. But Spiegelman – who travelled all the way to Auschwitz when that required getting a visa from a communist country – can answer that Vladek was in Auschwitz I, which used to be a barracks in World War I, and there the toilets were real toilets with plumbing (p. 58). It is not often that a “popular culture” item (whatever that is) like a comic book *corrects* our collective image of reality, instead of blindly following it.

What came before *Maus*?

More generally, Françoise Mouly is correct in saying that today *Maus* seem “inevitable”, but back in the 70s was basically unthinkable (p. 93). From the point of view of comics history, what is most striking is how removed *Maus* is from the underground comics scene with which Spiegelman is usually associated. That scene was the product of the 60s counter-culture. Underground comics were self-published or small press comics books quite unlike mainstream superhero comics: they were irreverent and provocative in content, with a focus on the social and cultural issues of the day, especially, of course, sex and drugs. They were usually sold in “head shops” (euphemism for places where you could buy soft drugs) and even if they did not circulate much, their style and content – and attitude – was also found on the covers of LPs, posters, leaflets and so on. In short, they were part of the “visual language” of the era. Today, those comics have been canonized as the source from which modern, mature, alternative comics sprang. The name to know and revere is Robert Crumb, R. Crumb for comics *connoisseurs*, whose satirical, subversive – and sometimes wilful racist – comics painted a very bleak picture of both mainstream and “alternative” America.

The scene was based in San Francisco, and Spiegelman lived and worked there in the early 70s, right at the end of the whole counter-culture movement. He worked (and was friends with) R. Crumb and many other underground cartoonists. He edited his own underground comic book *Arcade*, together with Bill Griffith, another counter-culture hero from the 60s who still writes his own alternative (*very* alternative) comic strip *Zippy the Pinhead*¹³. Even the relationship between *Maus* and underground comics is a very close one: the first incarnation of the story (also titled *Maus*) appeared in an underground comic book called *Funny Animals*, edited by Justin Green¹⁴. That short 3-page

¹³ It can be read online at <http://www.zippythepinhead.com/>.

¹⁴ Green is the author of one early graphic novel, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (Last Gasp Eco Funnies, 1972), about the psychological problems associated with his catholic upbringing. Spiegelman has repeatedly declared that *Binky* showed him that autobiographical

story is usually considered crude compared to the much longer *Maus*, but it contains all constituent elements of the larger book: the cats and mice metaphor, the attention to historical detail, even the present storyline framing the story in the past¹⁵. The crucial point is, that even that early story does not look like anything else that had been done before in underground comics. One only need to look at the story R. Crumb contributed to *Funny Animals* to measure the distance: the story is about a sexy female anthropomorphic chicken being followed by two little fox boys who lure her into a bedroom and eat her. *These* were the stories that readers of underground magazines appreciated.

The pattern repeated itself when Spiegelman moved back to New York. There in 1980 he and Françoise launched their own highly influential “graphix magazine” *RAW*. The magazine is usually described as continuing the tradition of underground comics, leading straightly into contemporary “alternative comics”. In my view, the magazine was Spiegelman's official declaration that “underground comix” were dead, and that the “scene” needed to open up. Printed with their own press in their apartment, the magazine was highly experimental both in format and content, and it drew heavily on foreign cartoonists and artists from Europe, Japan and even Africa. The result could not have been more different from the “classic” underground magazines of the 60s¹⁶.

Spiegelman used *RAW* to publish his own *Maus* in instalments, but once again *Maus* looked completely out of place in its pages. The typographical format underlined that distance: *Maus* chapters were published as small booklets bound together with the magazine as inserts. Remember how typographical decisions are always significant in Spiegelman's books? This is no exception: the small size format was inspired by some booklets about the persecution of the Jews and the death-camps published in Poland immediately after the war¹⁷. They belonged to Spiegelman's mother Anja, and besides being an important source of information for *Maus*, they are the real cultural and ethical antecedent of *Maus*.

No similar connection can be found between the chapters of *Maus*, and the experimental, avant-garde, in some cases frankly cerebral comics published in *RAW*. Much like the early short story *Maus* in that underground magazine, the longer, far more ambitious *Maus* was alone. And so was its author, Art Spiegelman: he says he received more support and appreciation from his boss at Topps bubble-gum company, who did not care for “alternative comics” at

comics were possible, and that “without *Binky*, there would be no *Maus*” (from Spiegelman's own introduction to Justin Green, *The Binky Brown Sampler*, Last Gasp, 1995).

¹⁵ The story is reprinted in *MetaMaus*, p. 105 – 106.

¹⁶ The contrast is even starker when we compare *RAW* with *Weirdo*, the magazine R. Crumb's published from 1981 to 1993. It continued steadfastly in the same visual and graphic mould as the old underground magazines, while the content exacerbated the nihilist critique typical of the 60s – but without the hope of a revolution (of any kind) to make up for it.

¹⁷ *MetaMaus* (pp. 16 – 17) shows the covers of those old booklets side by side with those of the instalments of *Maus*.

all, than from his cartoonist friends, to whom *Maus* was “invisible” (p. 43). In *MetaMaus* (pp. 189 – 203) Spiegelman quotes all the possible influences on *Maus* he can honestly quote, even going as far as to mention as important influences old strips like *Dick Tracy* and *Little Orphan Annie*¹⁸! But in my view these claims only underline how *Maus* stands on its own.

MetaMaus: a contemporary midrash

MetaMaus also stands alone. Spiegelman himself said in several interviews that the book “earned a life of its own”, and I cannot but agree. It is an immensely rewarding read, even if you know *Maus* from just one quick reading. The authors have tried to put everything in it, and it does repay the reader in many ways, but what I think sustain it as a work with its own dignity and purpose is not its wealth of material, but rather its clear moral message. It is not by chance, I think, that the collection of material about *Maus* in the DVD is called a *midrash*. What keeps that tradition of biblical commentary – and commentary on the commentary – alive today if not the implicit trust that *that* story can keep speaking to us? There is a question Chute does not ask Spiegelman in *MetaMaus*, namely whether he thought people would want to hear such a story. I do not think that question remain unasked by mistake: *MetaMaus* shows clearly that there was never any doubt in Spiegelman's mind as to the fact that *that* story could be told, and that it could speak to many people. Spiegelman repeatedly says he was surprised by the success of the *book*, but he never says he had any doubts about the *story*. We know now that that basic trust was an act of intellectual courage in itself, a much welcome one, in this age when representation is by definition in crisis, at least according to some literary theorists.

But something similar is also true, at a larger level, for *MetaMaus*: this book is also a great *midrash* that trusts that the cultural and historical connections behind *Maus* can project a much larger picture, and that these connections can indeed reach us. If many feel that Holocaust stories are per definition heavy, depressing – punitive reading better left to schools - *MetaMaus* replies through its endless references to comics, novels, movies and people, that that story is still alive and is indeed relevant to us all. The Elie Wiesel quote that “after Auschwitz we are all jews” does not sound rhetorical after reading *MetaMaus*: this books shows in how many ways the memoir of a single death-camp survivor can reach us: emotionally, psychologically, through words, through pictures, through their endless associations that extend into the future¹⁹.

In an interview Spiegelman says of *MetaMaus* that “it’s probably also useful in how to deal with what’s urgent in your own life by trying to assimilate it and

¹⁸ If you are not familiar with this classic American strip, its own title is a fairly good description.

¹⁹ The relevance of that quote for Spiegelman's understanding of the Holocaust is discussed by Spiegelman's himself in his essay *Looney Tunes, Zionism and the Jewish Question* (1989, reproduced in the accompanying DVD).

make it into something.”²⁰. Not all of us have 13 years to spare to create a long detailed narrative, but what is important here is the moral message implicit in that invitation: that *your* story is also worth telling, that *your* witness will also find a place in this vast, collective, *midrash*, *MetaMaus* the object travelled with me extensively while I was reading it for this review, and survived in excellent conditions, its pages still nicely bound, a beautiful object, with a beautiful message.

²⁰ From the interview quoted in fn. 3.