

# How Visual Icons and Animal Symbols Keep the Historical Impression of Holocaust in Art Spiegelman's Graphic Novel: *Maus I* and *II*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the icons and animal symbols in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the graphic novel which mainly depicts the story of Holocaust based on the experience of the author's father. As a second generation Jewish American writer, Spiegelman tries to recall the tragic history of Jews via the graphic novel. Firstly, I will include the two important icons, Nazi Swastika and Jewish Star of David, which symbolize brutal historical meanings and burdens in Holocaust. Secondly, I will mention the two opposite animal symbols: mice and cats, the previous seen as representation of Jews and the latter as Nazi Germans and depict how Jews suffered inhuman treatment from German Nazis. Thirdly, I suppose that the devilish conviction of Swastika furthers the prototypes of cats as if the connotation in Nazi icon reflects the nature of cats in *Maus*. As to the mice's impression as victims, it is similar to the negative meaning of every holy Jewish Star embroidered on each Jew's clothing as a mark of shame. Therefore, I finally sum up why Spiegelman's representation becomes impressive for he focalizes seriousness of genocide with historical icons and animal symbols in graphic novel which easily considered unreal and of entertainment.

**Keywords:** *graphic novel, Swastika, Star of David, Holocaust*

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<sup>1</sup> The full names of the two books are: *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Trouble Began*. I call them *Maus I* and *Maus II* in my paper, respectively.

## Introduction

As a challenge to the extreme representation of Holocaust, the Jewish writer Art Spiegelman's *Maus* creates a new type of form recording the traumatic and crucial historical events with popular media which is considered an accepted genre in public, and that is so-called graphic novel. Since Theodor Adorno criticized the reproduction of artistic representation for its traumatic memory on the living victims after Auschwitz, artists cautiously present the unforgettable events with their own strategies and secondary methods such as photos, films, exhibitions, drawings and so on. Whereas Adorno also criticized these mass culture for its fictionalized characteristics without uncovering the truth, how to deal with the artistic performance with serious attitude on realistic events, at the same time, what should be exposed to and what should not are big questions especially regarding ethnic trauma like Jewish genocide.

Graphic novel, attached with the popular media, is now taken as a political and ideological tool for artists to participate in public issues as well (Chute 214). Characterized as relaxed and recreational features, this novel provides readers a visualized space composed of hyperbole and impossible images. If viewers sometimes too preoccupied themselves in it to suppose that all the characters, background, and pictures are fabricated for making readers laugh, they will fall down to the traps of representation which is deprived of the main purpose. Facing blame for framing the vivid sketches on pages rather than giving a historical facts or documents, artists always deal with a question: how can I represent the bloody and horrible historical events in a visualized media seen as untrue in readers, especially concerning tragic history such as the Holocaust, 9/11, or Syria massacre?

According to Hye Su Park's bibliographical review of eighteen years research on *Maus*, she mentions that "a strong (and almost repetitive) concentration on certain themes—trauma, (post)memory, (post)history, generational transmission, and ethics of representation dominates and even restricts discussion of the text (147-8). Hence, most critics seem to put emphasis on the substantial influence of the Holocaust rather than on the pictorial symbols in graphic novel. Therefore, I pay more attention on the specific icons and symbols in the essay because it's necessary to rediscover some connotative meaning which elaborates the seriousness of graphic expression. If readers read *Maus I* and *II* with patience, it is easier for them to observe that Spiegelman seems to put the implications on these icons or symbols deliberately. At first, the novel includes two distinguished visual icons pervasive within page panels, and they are Nazi swastika and Jewish Stars of David, respectively. For the previous icons, Scholastic Incorporation's column of comic glossary defined that swastika is "[a]n ancient mystical symbol composed of a cross with bent arms, adopted by the Nazi as their symbol" thus readers can recognize it from others without hesitation owing to its notorious stereotype in history as a sign. As to the latter one, the Jewish religious symbol, Star of David originally was representative of Jewish identity in medieval times but was seen as an indignity while being sewn on the clothes of every Jew as a racial discrimination for Nazi. Secondly, two opposite animal symbols in characters are obvious for readers to point out, and they are cats and mice each other which "Jewish characters' mouse heads—including Spiegelman's own—are profoundly iconographic, but they infuse a specific historical and ethnic identity into the cat-and-mouse dynamic's broader cultural associations," said Kartalopoulos.

Combining the visual icons and animal symbols, Spiegelman challenges the limitation of Holocaust representation with popular media and mixes up the realistic events and seemingly unreal world with historical marks and metaphorical prototypes. Therefore, I argue that why Spiegelman's representational version can be

well-known and celebrated than others depends on the combination of imaginary space and historical signs.

### **I Two Visual Icons in *Maus***

Based on William E. Herman's statistics research concerning the most universal visual icons in Holocaust Memorial Museum, he maintains that the two most frequent are the Star of David (620 different tiles out of the total of 3,324 tiles 19%) and the Nazi Swastika (7% of all tiles), and Herman's study suggests that people are concerned about the unforgettable Holocaust symbols very much owing to its sharp impression which descendant generation will remember the wrongdoings the last generation had done and keep it in mind (9). After all, history is created by man, and these representative icons can be taken as witnesses to history for granted; not only does it include the characteristics of the specific context but also belong to the particular event itself such as genocide in Auschwitz as Dr. Oren Baruch Stier put it in an online interview regarding Holocaust symbols:

[Symbols] that were used at the time in some graphic way that had some relationship to the Holocaust but after the Holocaust can be used in a variety of contexts . . . so any time you see the shape of a swastika, there's already some association with the Holocaust going on, any time you see a yellow Magen David, a Jewish star, there's something going on related to the Holocaust but it's much more malleable than the concrete symbols would be.

So, the two abstract icons will make readers think of Holocaust directly in *Maus*, and the reason why the two bring about reactions is their close connection to readers' emotion and relationship like Dr. Stier's statement: "I'll say that without symbols we might not really have a relationship to those events. As those events recede further and further in time, and as people have less and less of a personal connection to those events, they need some sort of trigger. . . ." Whenever readers have a glimpse of the two icons in each panel and frames, they would generate definite feelings at the moment especially for those who have read the materials from history textbook. I think that is how Spiegelman represents Holocaust to readers who impossibly return to the real history by means of putting prevalent icons in graphic narrative.

#### **A. The Swastika: The Historical Burden**

In *Maus*, the icon of Swastika turns up first time when Vladek accompanies Anja to a sanitarium by train where they look at a flag fluttering on the top out of the window (*Maus I* 32). Here, everyone's face seems to be depressed once Vladek recalls that it's his first time seeing the icon, and it also foresees the uneasy future will fall upon these characters. On seeing the icon of swastika affects not only the fate of these miserable Jews but also emotions of readers who live in a safe space as if they both have common reaction to the icon as a historical vice. Therefore, how the abstract symbol is tagged as evil for most people after Holocaust is a big question. As a matter of fact, its aim for adoption varies from different cultures and areas with similar shape; for instance, it is given divine and religious meaning in some Oriental countries like Chinese Buddhism and Indian Hinduism even other religious sects (see Fig. 1). Whereas its symbolic implication transforms when it comes to German with different shape and color, and it was "adopted by German racialist and nationalist cults, which imbued it with anti-Semitic connotations. . . . When Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* about the mark's symbolism, however, he ignored all these earlier representations," mentioned Steven Heller, a Jewish designer, in his online article.

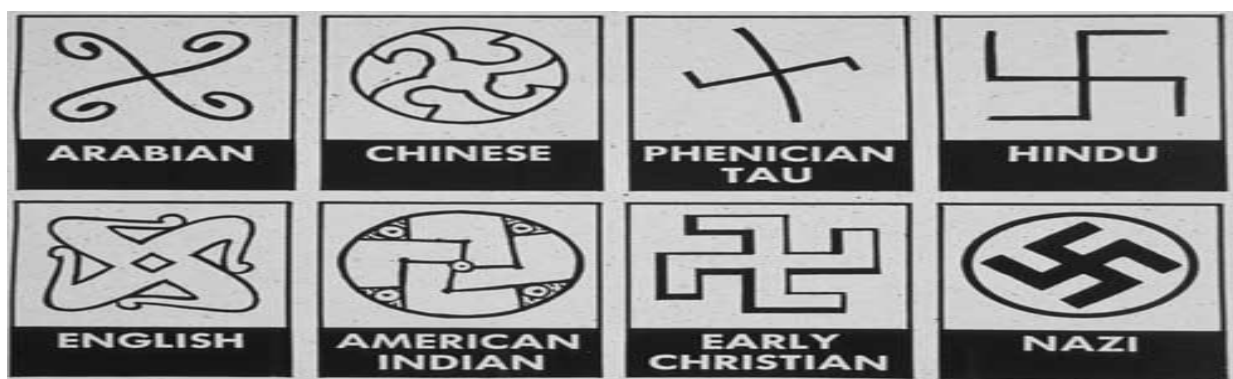


Fig. 1. The Different Images of Swastika from Varied Culture (Steven Heller's "Swastika Guilt")

Besides, he mentioned that "I also argue against those who want to reclaim, through art, the swastika in its benign form. It is too late for such righteous attempts. The atrocities committed under this magnificently designed form must never be forgotten" (Heller). Although the symbol now is viewed from the perspective of Jewish second generation, the wicked essence of Nazi symbol seems too inhuman to deprive of its notoriety.

In the opening of chapter two, Jewish people raise their heads and gaze at the swastika; however, their faces all become black, inconsistent with the white face in last chapter; furthermore, the shade of background looks heavier as though the stripes around the flag used for stressing on the mark within the iris diaphragm, that is, swastika (*Maus I* 25). Ironically, the title of the chapter is "The HONEYMOON" which implies that the Jewish newlywed won't have a wonderful life as common ones because within the territory of Nazi/swastika no Jews will be as fine as ever. One day after Vladek's grandparents are sent to Auschwitz, they are all informed to assemble in the stadium and register for the passport. In the plaza, readers are shown a larger panel within which are hundreds of crowded Jews, waiting for the order of Nazi German (*Maus I* 88-90). There appears a flag of swastika by the margin side where all enclosed gill net seems to stop anyone getting out of the dominion of Nazi. The flag of swastika symbolizes the beginning of racial discrimination and specifies the process of purification as Malcolm Quinn suggests that "[t]he swastika was from the very first the sole distinguishing mark of National Socialism and its ambition to set up a state based on an ideology of racial purity" (147). One another distinguished page regarding swastika is in the turning point when Spiegelman couple require choosing which direction they should go on the crossroad made of the shape of swastika. I think Spiegelman deliberately arranges the symbolic icon as a vivid and symbolic mark from which any reader can realize what it supposes to infer (*Maus I* 125). The couple walks together accompanying gloomy shadows with each other on the bent arm of brighten swastika. The icon indicates both of them lapse into the genocide scheme step by step, and the symbolic image of swastika/Nazi trap and the following "MOUSE TRAP" chapter match up as well. Any direction implies possible danger and death; choosing any way gives no exist and no hope; besides, all of messages Spiegelman wants to tell through the crucial icon are this historical burden it maintains like a fetter which fastens each Jew on the horrible Nazi label reminds viewers of the traumatized past while seeing it until today.

### **B. The Star of David: From Divinity to Indignity**

Shaped by the hexagram as a holy name entitled "God of Israel," the ancient and divine visual icon becomes Jew's remarkable sign which means "our military hero, King David, did not win by his own might, but by the support of the Almighty" (Simmons, "From the Holocaust to the Israeli flag"). In the very beginning, the

deeper meaning of its shape pertains to the religious signification: the six points of the Star of David symbolize God's rule over the universe in all six directions: north, south, east, west, up and down; by degrees, the star becomes Jewish identity so far in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, the meaning of divinity was replaced when Nazi German asked Jews to wear a yellow badge on their clothes as a symbol of shame in WWII, and it already took place dated from the Middle Ages when Muslim and Christian authorities had ever done the same (Simmons).

On the cover of chapter four in *Maus I*, readers get a glimpse of hellish tableau where many Jews are hanged and their face appear to be too grievous and ghastly for anyone to imagine the realistic possibility. The bright Star of David attached on the front jacket looks distinct from the other murky color behind the scene (71). Spiegelman seems to present viewers a puzzle why he places the bright star in this panel and imply the connotative meaning of the whole picture. Actually, the word "Jude" will be engraved on the star for the good of Nazi German because it's easier to make a distinction from non-Jews; moreover, it stands for a racial discrimination through separating the ethnic group from their religious symbols. The divinity of Judaism now has transformed from sacred spirit to dishonorable failure as Jennifer Rosenberg maintains:

[T]he badge represented more than humiliation and shame, it represented fear. If a Jew forgot to wear their badge they could be fined or imprisoned, but often, it meant beatings or death. Jews came up with ways to remind themselves not to go out without their badge. Posters often could be found at the exit doors of apartments that warned Jews by stating: 'Remember the Badge!' 'Have you already put on the Badge?' 'The Badge!' 'Attention, the Badge!'.

The glorious star of God is not holy anymore; relatively, it beckons the fear and death in this panel as if the star degenerates into the hand of the death or of the swastika/Nazi camp.

Another remarkable panel is on the first page of chapter one in *Maus II*: a Jewish prisoner who wears a stripe pajama<sup>2</sup> with the Star of David and serial number is encircled by a sharp cage which it appears to penetrate into the Jewish icon on the position near the heart. The indignity of the mark and numbers supposes to hint that Jews are treated as inferior to German as a degraded group and any Nazi German can attack them while seeing the icon. It also seems to be considered as a device designed for Nazis who can kill any Jews from the top of tower as long as they witness the conspicuous icon; in a way, the star represents death in addition to the indignity here.

## II When Visual Icons Meet Animal Symbols

Aside from the two distinct historical icons, there also appear two important animal prototypes which Spiegelman adopts them as metaphors, consistent with the previous two ones. They are mice who become the representatives of Jews and cats who are the typical impression of Nazi German, respectively. I think it's necessary to reason how Spiegelman combines the historical icons with the inhuman characters together since it's one of the reasons why he breakthroughs the limitation of Holocaust representation. He adopts animal images

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<sup>2</sup> It is also the representative of Holocaust, but my concern is focusing on the two visual icons: Swastika and Star of David.

to replace the human figures because the realistic characters in history are too suffering and pathetic to put their appearances in the graphic novel; besides, the incomplete animal drawing are proposed to against the Nazism in artistic genre, a kind of perfection ideology as Thomas Doherty mentions: “In *Maus*, cartoons are not just a shield against the visual pleasures of big screen Nazism but a medium that reverses the process of projection” (77). Then, I will discuss how the two animal symbols and two icons have something to do with each other once they are put together in the following paragraphs.

### **A. The Swastika and Cats: The Brutal Perpetrator?**

On the cover of *Maus I* and *II*, readers could not help but pay more attention to the two pivotal images attached with each other in the iris diaphragm: the huge black swastika which fastened a cat label who looks unfriendly and strange suspends in a high position. Below the mark, there are poor mice that appear to be wretched and miserable. Such a cover design seems to suggest that the power of German Nazi besieges the territory of Jews, and no one can escape alive. The historical icon and cat prototype are connected to give readers a room for contemplation, like an enigma which invites anyone to interpret the connotation. Andreas Huyssen furthers to explain that “it is actually a strategy of another kind of mimetic approximation” and “getting past the cipher to the people and their experience. But before getting past the cipher, Spiegelman has to put himself into that very system of ciphering” (76). The image of cat echoes the meaning of the Swastika as wild, brutal, and violence no wonder the cat prototype can remind readers of the simultaneous characteristics as if the prototype and icon are reciprocal relationship. The effect of historical gravity will be striking if the artist’s option of animal metaphor for the metaphorical meaning can strengthen the abstract essence in the visual icon; therefore, it seems that “*Maus* resonates less with Disney productions than with a whole tradition of popular animal fables from Aesop to LaFontaine and even Kafka” since the visual icon gives it the embodiment of history (Huyssen 70).

Another pair of evidence is depicted when Vladek hears some news from a fellow who talks about how his cousin is recognized by Nazi Germans. Spiegelman also inserts the Swastika into the diaphragm where the malicious cat figures are bullying a poor cat in front of the icon (*Maus I* 33). As a metaphor of interrelationship between Jews and Nazi Germans, the cat, looks like a predator, “[. . .] is the obvious natural enemy of the mouse and, as German, the principal killer of mice here” (Young 690). And the background of the Swastika elaborates the intensity of animal symbol; its arrangement here takes advantage of graphic novel and makes readers feel impressive associations.

### **B. The Star of David and Mice: The Wretched Prey?**

Spiegelman quotes a passage from a German newspaper in the opening in *Maus II*:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed . . . 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! (3)

Obviously, Nazi Germans never deal with Jews as human beings; instead, they treat them as filthy mice that will spread the bacteria and threaten the pure German blood. Nazi’s preconceived stereotype furthers Spiegelman to foreshadow the fatal position Jews is located, and he tries to make the racial discrimination have something to do with the Jewish plight. As a horrible creature and a hatred for ordinary people, facing the cold-blooded killing for mice is similar to the Holocaust suffering for Jews. Hence Vladek talks of hundreds of Jews are sent to the gas

chamber in Auschwitz and burned all together with fire after death as if they are taken as non-humans; moreover, the images of all mice being burned in the grave suggest the doomsday of all poor Jews/mice like what Doherty maintains: "From subhumans to nonhumans, the Jews are linked with vermin, to be eradicated, like plague bearers, from the Fatherland" (74). Once Vladek and Anja flee to a female Polish's house and hide themselves from being found, they encounter a rat in the cellar and Vladek intentionally identifies it as a mouse lest Anja will feel frightened. It is ambiguous here that two mice meet a rat and which side is real mouse hints readers the similar characteristics in them: no matter who are Jews or rats, both have to hide and escape in fear of being killed.

My final analysis will put emphasis on the cover of chapter four in *Maus II*: three Jews who also put on the stripe pajamas with yellow star are in front of an American flag and Vladek looks depressed by their side (101). Again, the divine Star of David as Jewish identity has turned into a shameful mark to Nazi Germans because they see Jews subordinate to other race. As such, the yellow star is taken as a label for Germans to confirm whether they are Jews/mice or not. Even though the alive Jews like Vladek are saved by Americans in the end, the yellow star as a sign of humiliation will accompany them forever as well as the mice prototype. This impressive panel looks similar to a graphic picture on a German newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, on which numerous mice are sneaking up the bag and biting something. Near the bag, the visible Star of David marked with "Jude" seems to respond to the mice image (Doherty 75). In these two comparative graphics, I sum up that Spiegelman's motivation here is evoke readers' concern of the stereotypes on Jews in Nazi's perspective via sharing the reciprocal characteristics in the icon and the animal symbol. By the way, the representation in his design is based on historical materials from Nazi's artistic presentation; this adaptation makes his graphic novel more convincing and persuasive rather than being a simply representation in fictionalized space.

### **Conclusion**

In a word, historical icons and animal prototypes become indispensable elements in Spiegelman's *Maus I* and *II*. His representation of Holocaust confronts the limitation how a cartoonist reminds readers of an unspeakable historical trauma in history on the verge of horrible reality and equivocal fabrication. After all, any demonstrative representation is never equal to the true history, uncovering unimaginable torture on sufferers and awakening the dead as Artie mentions in *Maus II* as a narrator: "no matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem much compared to surviving Auschwitz" (44). Whereas all he has done is keeping track of the testimonies his father leaves him and makes history speak in his delicate graphic language through symbols and icons. The avant-garde representation is not only his way keeping the history but also encouraging readers to keep it as well.

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# 阿特斯皮格曼圖像小說《鼠族》中視覺符號與動物象徵對德國猶太大屠殺 的歷史印象紀實

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## 摘要

本篇論文目的在於探討作家阿特斯皮格曼根據他父親親身經歷，描繪出德國猶太大屠殺故事的圖像小說《鼠族》中的視覺符號與動物象徵。作為一個第二代猶太裔美國作家，他試圖透過圖像小說來回憶猶太人悲劇性的歷史。第一部分，我將涵蓋兩個重要的歷史符號，分別是納粹黨徽：卐字；與猶太宗教符號：大衛之星，兩者象徵了大屠殺中殘酷的歷史意義與沉重包袱。第二部分，我將提及兩個自然界中相剋的動物象徵：老鼠與貓，前者作為猶太人的化身，而後者為德國納粹黨，並且描述猶太人如何遭受納粹黨非人道的對待。第三部分，我認為納粹黨徽傳達的邪惡信念進一步加強貓在小說中的形貌，好像在納粹符號中隱含了貓散發的動物野性就好比納粹黨的殘酷樣貌。至於老鼠給人受害者的印象，也相似於繡在每位猶太人衣服上當下已充滿負面意義的羞辱符號：大衛之星。因此最後我將歸納出作家的圖像再現如此讓人印象深刻的因素，在於他使用了歷史符號與動物象徵，將一般認為貌似虛構和娛樂性質導向的圖像小說中，強調了種族屠殺的歷史嚴重性。

**關鍵字：**圖像小說、納粹黨徽、大衛之星、猶太屠殺。