

Chaos and order in memory The aesthetic of the fragment of trauma

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Abstract: Throughout the production of *Maus- a survivor's tale* (1991), its author Art Spiegelman proclaims in *Metamaus* (2011), that in addition to the testimony of his father, the historical basis were an intrinsic base so that he could independently visualize the genocide by which his relatives have been through. At the same time, there is no way to deny how the author's imagination includes itself in his work, transforming the work of the post-generation author in a blend of fantasy and history. In this article, we analyze the way in which Spiegelman reconstructs the Shoah, becoming active in the creation of new paradigms for the retransmission of the event, without leaving aside the historiographical bases.

Keywords: Interest, subject of Law, juridical-contracting relation, rights and obligations, accessory obligation, principal obligation.

Introductory Reviews

In Art Spiegelman's *Maus: a survivor's tale* (1991), the author is dedicated to architecting his father's discourse, Vladek Spiegelman, a Shoah survivor, bearing the testimony, as well as a series of historical references, such as photographs, pamphlets, books, and testimonials from other survivors, mixing public and private memories, in addition to using other mechanisms of representation, which break the incomprehensible barrier that surrounds the genocide, such as the juxtaposition of chaos and order through its illustrations.

1. Once upon a time, in Auschwitz...

Lawrence Langer, reflecting on his visit to Auschwitz in 1964, writes that the "existence of Dachau and Auschwitz as historical phenomena has altered not only our conception of reality, but its very nature (...) The challenge to the literary imagination is to find a way of making this fundamental truth accessible" (1975, p. xii). Alvin Rosenfeld also argues that "the Holocaust literature is an attempt to express a new order of consciousness, a recognizable shift in being. The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before" (apud Bloom, 2004, pp 21 – 48).

Both Langer and Rosenfeld take up the challenge of identifying, classifying, and analyzing two decades of the literature on the Shoah since it involves a wide range of genres, nationalities and interpretations of the relationship between "Historical fact and the imaginative truth" (1975, p. 08). For Langer, in the *literature of atrocity*, as he calls the set of works whose theme is the trauma of war, no fiction will be completely fiction for there is a need for the presence of history itself. It is based on that that Spiegelman writes *Maus – a survivor's tale* (1991), seeking to cover the representation of war in other areas, beyond the concentration camp, such as his own life. The author represents the junction proposed by Langer, putting his work as not an act of invention but of restoration: in an imaginary displacement, his father's Auschwitz becomes the son's *Mauschwitz*.



Figure 01 – Mauschwitz. *Maus*, p. 169

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Maus represents then the aesthetic of the fragment of trauma, from the perspective of the generations post-survivors: through historiography brought by the testimony, Spiegelman inserts his own imaginary through the anthropomorphic rats, disturbing the apparently organized structure of the work, and bringing the chaos.

The article from the sociologist Franz Josef Brüseke called “Caos e ordem na teoria sociológica”, 2007 (Chaos and Order in Sociological Theory) builds a line of thought that encompasses both the biophysical and astrological perspective and its effects on the capitalist community. According to the author, chaos and order are defined as the flight of a fly: with no well-defined direction, but with a set of unordered movements, which allow chance to have a decisive role in determining the trajectory. Order and chaos in this sense are differentiated by their positions and spaces, since while order defines places and shows clear alternatives, chaos is an unstructured state that opens itself to all possibilities:

O caos diferencia-se do nada, pois não tem como anticonceito do ser, a existência. O caos é um estado específico do ser, não em uma forma objetivada, mas dinâmica, abrindo-se a todas as possibilidades. (...) Na forma estética, a contradição entre ordem e caos é dissolvida em favor da ordem. A composição musical transforma o rumor do universo na batucada do samba ou na sinfonia clássica. A grande arte, para o gosto europeu, é a que deixa pressentir o caos sob a superfície estruturada².

Following the same idea of *no-structure x structure*, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Ilya Prigogine (1997) relies on several authors to exemplify that small changes in the behavior of some elements of nature can lead to changes throughout a system: in our planetary system, celestial bodies must obey Newton’s gravitational laws, but they also interact with each other and bring about infinitesimal adjustments in the motion of the planets. That is to say that small changes in the initial conditions of a system can cause drastic modifications; even if the deterministic laws are fulfilled it is impossible to achieve exact solutions for equations implied in a given environment. In this sense, chaos then must disturb the prevailing order so that new relations are established, generating the so-called *bifurcations*, that is decision points from which new structures arise, behaving in a certain way during an unpredictable time, and redirect paths. In *Maus*, such decisions occur all the time: Vladek’s father seeing that his daughter had been sent to the left side of the queue with her four children - the side that went straight to the concentration camps – decided to jump to the other side, choosing to follow her. After that, he was never seen by any family member, probably dying in the camps: “Those with a stamp were let go home. But there were very few Jews now left in Sosnowiec...One from three they kept at the stadium...Maybe 10.000 people – and with them, my father.” (p. 91).



Figure 02 – Bad side. *Maus*, p. 91

According to Bauman (1999), there is an intense need to maintain order as a result of our ability to learn and memorize. However, there is a time when language fails to structure the world; the ambivalence becomes present from this point on. What the author seeks to demonstrate is that chaos and order go hand in

² Chaos differentiates itself from nothing, since it has no antithesis about being, existence. Chaos is a specific state of being, not in a form that is objective, but dynamic, opening itself for all possibilities. (...) In the aesthetic form, the contradiction between order and chaos is dissolved in favor of order. The musical composition transforms the rumor of the universe in the *batucada* of *samba* or the classic symphony. The great art, for the European taste, is the one that allows to perceive the chaos under the structured surface. (my translation)

hand. In fact, one descends from the other: “Order and chaos are modern twins. They were conceived in the midst of the rupture and collapse of the orderly world (...) that knew neither necessity nor chance, a world which was only, without ever thinking of how to be³.” (1999, p. 12, *my translation*)

The ambiguity between these two elements arises through negation: without the negation of the positivity of order, there is no chaos; without chaos, there is no order either: “indifiability, incoherence, ambiguity, confusion, inability to decide, ambivalence (...) is pure negativity⁴” (1999, pp. 14-15, *my translation*). In *Maus*, the culmination of chaos between the two temporal structures takes place on page 201, when the writer Art, with his mouse mask, leans over the drawing table, swindled among the mountain of bodies and flies that surrounds him.



Figure 03 – Chaos and order. *Maus*, p. 201

Such chaos permeates every area: in relation to the linguistic composition, his speech goes from one place to another, varying the events of Vladek’s and the Jews’ lives to his, with no apparent connection between them: “In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby...Between May 16, 1944 over 100.000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz...”. In the visual field, the absence of order appears in some references, such as the flies – previewed by the ambiguous “Time flies ...” that plays both with the speed of time and with the insects that permeate the page and flies around the dead victims. Art brings to the book his current interpretation of trauma such as the use of the mouse mask, which opens the way to the conflict of his personality: on one hand, there is the heavy inheritance of Judaism and the persecution suffered by the parents during the Second war; on the other there is something of his subjectivity that “resists” to be completely assimilated, exposing that the symbiosis between writer and mouse may never be fully complete. In fact, the depression that attacks Art at the bottom of the page reflects the impossibility of finding oneself amidst the chaos left by public and private stories, looking for something that makes sense what apparently has no connection.

Eventhough, the articulating point between linguistic and visual discourse is the movement between life and death: Art is constantly trying to work through the incongruity of the facts in pointing out the idiosyncrasies between the tragic trajectory of his father and the Jews of Europe, and his personal and professional success with his daughter’s birth and *Maus*’ commercial success. Life goes on but there is something of the Shoah that is reluctant to go, and that resists any attempt of interpretation, remaining literal,

³ “Ordem e caos são gêmeos modernos. Foram concebidos em meio à ruptura e colapso do mundo ordenado (...), que não conhecia a necessidade nem o acaso, um mundo que apenas era, sem pensar jamais em como ser.”

⁴ “indefinibilidade, incoerência, ambiguidade, confusão, incapacidade de decidir, ambivalência (...) é pura negatividade”.

regardless of the context in which it is inserted: the pile of bodies eventually permeates more than half of the comic and almost engulfs the author, who sinks amid dates and factual and personal information. Through the window, we see the same tower of the concentration camp invading the space of the present, raising questions: after all, where is Art? Historical and private facts are mixed in a way that the origin of the author - and his subsequent subjectivity - is confused with the narrative of the father: both become inseparable, populating the same speech bubbles. The ambiguity reaches its climax at the end with the sentence: “All right, Mr Spiegelman. We’re ready to shoot,” leaving the reader without knowing to tell whether *shoot* refers to filming or shooting - or which narrative universe it belongs to.



Figure 04 – “WAH”. *Maus*, p. 202

On the next page, more characters suddenly appear to interview Art, who seeing himself in a sea of questions, begins to diminish himself, to crying out for his mother at the end of the page. The others who are present ignore the situation and continue with their thirsty questionnaires, without reflecting on the answers given; each with its masks represents distinct groups and queries: German cats question the new generations and whether they should feel guilty about such a historically distant situation; Israeli rats question what would change if the state of Israel had already existed; the American dogs suggest the production of other *Maus* items, as well as ask how the audience should feel about the genocide. As a consequence, Art, increasingly coaxed, answers the questions with a frustrated “WAH”.

When they speak, the characters actually carry more than they say: the masks indicate that their subjectivities are tied to their nationalities, and that metonymically their questions represent the whole from which they come. Therefore, it is not only the story of Vladek that goes through the perspective of Art, but also the work itself has become a kind of kaleidoscope, suggesting different visions for those who read it. The movement of the work is triangular, generating a movement between the words, images and perspective of the reader, which we will call here narrative three-dimensionality: at first sight, the information seems confused and unstructured (texts permeate the page, questions remain unanswered). However, when the characters interrupt Art’s flow of thought with their microphones and their masks, the reader’s dimension becomes present as they are invited to interpret what is happening and who the characters are, now that they are also part of the story.

We realize, then, that the narrative passes through an interpretive level beyond the retransmission of one generation (survivor) to another (family and future readers). The different perspectives transform *Maus* into a contemporary metaphor of the Shoah, seeking the symbolic significance of public and private history through

the humanization of the historical moment. During the early years of the State of Israel, little was said about those who had returned from the concentration camps, since their victim status ashamed a nation that sought to become strong. Over the time, the approach that suited the country most was through heroic deeds, such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. At the time of Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, survivors were then given the status of victims, whose only way out of sanity would be a life dedicated to witnessing (Bertin, 2013).

If formerly the survivor figure was primarily seen only through the collective and the act of witnessing, what the work brings is the metaphor of the humanization of the historical moment: Art transforms into illustrations his father's whole life - before, during, and after war - even against his will, since such commonplace facts would not be appropriate and would have nothing to do with the Shoah. The same is true of his own subjectivation, both as a child and as an author, since, at the same time that he bears the inheritance of a history that does not belong to him, he draws himself with a clear split between his face and his mask, as a way of attributing to oneself an autonomous subjectivity (or at least the search for one).

It is, then, through the ambiguities raised, through the indeterminate movement between life and death and through the construction of subjectivation that the page becomes a metaphor for the book architecture as a whole. During the construction of *Maus*, Art faces the same questions raised by his father, either through public history or through private history – seeing by the temporal interpolation between the past and present-exploding in the way the author represents what he hears and experiences. Then, as previously raised, chaos appears in both temporal and also spatial disassembly, putting both Art and the reader in an undetermined place, but with choices to be made, creating possibilities for the panels to be interpreted in different ways: Is Art in his father's space-time projecting his future anxieties and doubts? Or is he in his present, reliving his father's traumas?

Through the intersection of Spiegelman's textual, visual, and temporal levels, the Shoah becomes a symbol that explodes in several dimensions, allowing itself to be seen from several perspectives so that *Maus* becomes the genocide of the author himself, re-elaborating the Shoah to find it at its own historical moment. By adopting the mouse's identity - both through the mask and through the complete metamorphosis - Art decides to link his identity to the historical-cultural moment from where the mouse comes: the genocide lived by his father. Thus, his dialectical choices of representation indicates that the place from where he speaks today has as important part in his formation the past and the identity attributed to the Jews during World War II. Eventually, when he begins to draw, he enters into his father's story, making the mouse's head his own. The work of the writer, then, is to transform the testimony not only into something that can be conceived by the public but also into something that can be represented, despite the difficulties: "Somehow, my arguments with my father have lost a little of their urgency...And auschwitz just seems too scary to think about...So I just lie there..." (p. 204):



Figure 05 – “An orchestra?” . *Maus*, p. 214

Art questions his father about the existence of an orchestra in the concentration camp, and is impressed by the fact that Vladek only remembers to march. The author still insists, claiming to be a well-documented fact, and receives in response that at the gate, while marching, there were only guards. The illustration brings to the reader the duality of memories about the Shoah: if in the first drawing, the orchestra occupies about half the space, after Vladek's denial, the prisoners appear marching in front of it. However, the tip of the instruments seen above the heads illustrates the duality of public and private information with which the following generations have to deal: on the one hand, there is the individuality of each testimony, with its own particular trajectory; on the other, there is an excess of journalistic information, based on the collective. Through the conversation with his father, as well as the visual resource, Art intertwines the public and the private at the same node.

According to Brüseke, in order to avoid constant chaos, the world organizes itself through binarisms: such codes would separate the world into two possibilities only, allowing the creation of clear rules eliminating any doubt within the coded communication: “What is not behind is ahead. What is left is not right⁵” (Brüseke, 2007). The German sociologist Niclas Luhmann says that all communicative systems of society structure their communication based on the binary code (1990): “Thus, the legal system works with the code justice and injustice, the economy, referring to property, with the code possess and non-possess etc⁶” (apud Brüseke, 2007). What happens in the historiographical discourse of the Shoah has acquired the same connotation: victim or perpetrator of trauma; life or death. In an conversation with his analyst, when Pavel says: “Then you think it’s admirable to survive. Does that mean it’s NOT admirable to NOT survive?” (p. 204), Art answers: “I-I think I know what you mean. It’s as if life equals winning, so death equals losing.” (p. 204).



Figure 06 – “Death equals losing”. *Maus*, p. 205

However, systems become more complex as they take on more layers: in addition to the binarism between the victim and the Nazi, there is now also the complexity that revolves around the survivor: how would he actually be victimized, if he did not live the war in a fully way, if he did not go through the gas chambers (one of the greatest symbols of the Shoah)? Pavel says: “Anyway, the victims who died can never tell THEIR side of the story, so maybe it’s better not to have any more stories” (p. 204)

The binary code is a specific way of simplifying human reflection and communication. By embracing concepts and considering issues that are not as clear in communication (as all the complexity surrounding the word *survivor*), we begin to consider language part of a system of symbolic laws, rather than the system of signs. In this regard, Lacan adopts a different perspective on Saussure’s theories by conceiving language as something synchronic rather than diachronic, not isolating language from the plane of speech and the plane of language. While the diachronic reading focuses on the changes that language presents over time, the synchronous reading does so in a specific and momentary period of time.

Por fim, a referência à linguística nos introduzirá no método que, ao distinguir as estruturações diacrônicas na linguagem, pode permitir-nos compreender melhor o valor diferente que nossa linguagem assume na interpretação das resistências e da transferência, ou então diferenciar os

⁵“O que não está atrás está na frente. O que é da esquerda não é da direita”.

⁶“Assim, trabalha o sistema jurídico com o código justiça e injustiça, a economia, referindo-se a propriedade, com o código possuir e não-possuir etc”.

efeitos típicos do recalque e a estrutura do mito individual na neurose obsessiva⁷ (p. 289, 1953)

In *Maus*, the value of resistances lies not only in the act of drawing, but also and especially in the pronounced text: in his appointments with Pavel, for example, Art does not care to answer the questions, not even to silence himself before something that cannot be expressed. In the previous pages, the avalanche of texts comes in seemingly disconnected form, with Art leaning over his drawings trying to organize his ideas. Language, then, becomes part of a larger context of meaning, and even its void has a specific connotation within the context.

Maus does not shy away from the responsibility to remember; on the contrary, when drawing as an integral part of his father's story, Art takes upon himself the act of reconstituting Vladek's "buried" past, leading him to declare: "All such things of the war, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all...until you rebuild me all this from your questions" (p. 98). From the questionnaire, which looks more like an interrogation, *Maus* travels between the generational transmission through the origins of the author, through the constitution of a reality formed by the public and private histories, through the temporal interrelationship, through the problematic of fictionalization reaching the inclusion of the reader as an active part in the process: it is the reader who will decide which way to follow at the crossroads proposed by the author, just like the characters. Is Art an author in search of his own identity, or someone who cries out for the attention of a father traumatized by his past? Is accompanying *Maus* following the story of Vladek or Artie? Was the son genuinely trying to reconstruct the family history, or exposing his father since he is not given a chance to answer? In *Maus*, Art not only avoids answering the questions but also offers clues to various interpretations, without abstaining, while at the same time placing the Shoah as an integral part of his subjectification process.

2. The renewal of memory

Re-reading the black-and-white past through the colors of the present is a very complex point when it comes to the Shoah, since at the same time the act of "remembering the 6 million" remains an imperative in the Jewish community, as doing it is the biggest challenge. In his article "The Holocaust as Active Memory" (2013), Seeberg and Lenz adopt the term used by the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel in calling the question of the elephant in the room: the "elephant" would be any object or subject that everyone is definitely aware of but no one is willing to publicly acknowledge (Zerubavel, 2006, p.11). After years of silence around the genocide, the "elephant" has metamorphosed into a huge and ubiquitous materialization of memorials, cultural production, academic studies and other practices. However, the authors point out that such an increase in productivity is not necessarily related to the engagement of members of society with genocide, nor does it exclude the prevalence of cultures of silence in the private or public sphere.

This is because on a daily basis there is often no space to talk about events such as the Shoah and it is necessary to break the routines and regularities of daily life in order to create a space for conversations of a different quality, mainly through fragmented testimonies, and even the silence that permeates the families of the survivors. In this way, memory becomes an intrinsic element to the dynamic processes that make the difference to the social contexts in which people participate, remaining relevant even in the present moment. The memory of the Shoah then becomes a tangential concern subject to powerful multidirectional forces of re-signification, and how to make it active poses itself as the greatest challenge.

In her article "The Holocaust: Private Memories, Public Memories," Anita Shapira (1998) argues that the official memory of the Shoah seems to have become an important force only in societies in which the transcultural narratives and iconography of genocide have become a turning point for national self-identification. In some national settings, the official memory of the Shoah temporarily assumed a self-critical profile; in other contexts, it has always been a force of national self-promotion. In any case, the author points out that the connection between what she calls the Holocaust culture and the digital age is a determining factor when we consider the various forms of celebration of memory. The act of remembering the Shoah in the way we conceive today would be intrinsically linked to the age of photography, film, radio, and television - so much so that *Schinder's List* was released at the same time that the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC opened its doors, in 1993. Thus, despite its long history, the cosmopolitan memory of the Shoah of the new millennium is synonymous with digital technology, even producing what Shapira considers pioneering digital advances, as in the case of the database of the USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and

⁷ "Finally, the reference to linguistics will introduce us to the method which, by distinguishing the diachronic structures in language, may enable us to better understand the different value our language assumes in the interpretation of resistances and transference, or to differentiate the typical effects of repression and the structure of the individual myth in obsessional neuroses".

Education, which housed 53,000 survivors' testimonies, calling the IWitness project: Developers combine the visual testimony of Shoah survivors recorded in the last decades with highly sophisticated computer software. Its main goal is to hold meaningful encounters between the children of tomorrow's school and the holograms of yesterday's survivors, through which the figures of the past respond to children's questions in an interactive environment and an intergenerational atmosphere.

Maus is also permeated - almost entirely - by such an atmosphere, and because of this, rather than documenting memory, the book restores it: by rediscovering the possibilities of comic and cartoon, Spiegelman has found a way of stylizing the horror without aesthetizing it:

I didn't want people to get too interested in the drawings. I wanted them to be there, but the story operates somewhere else. It operates somewhere between the words and the idea that's in the pictures and in the movement between the pictures, which is the essence of what happens in a comic. So by not focusing you too hard on these people you're forced back into your role as reader rather than looker. (Brown, Oral History Review, pp. 103-104)

The "other place" where Spiegelman puts *Maus* gives the work the dialogical status of hybridized which remains in the middle between image and word, allowing meaning to be lost (and perhaps to be found by the reader) in the movement between the two discourses. The work is not a HQ in which words only punctuate or float idly above images, but stand as a crucial component of the text and can even compete with the images for the reader's attention and create a divided state of consciousness.

These questions introduce another temporal layer in the story: *Maus* not only addresses the relationship between the present and the past but also the future, through the absent presence of Nadja, the author's daughter, the only one to be mentioned but without a character. The way in which Nadja appears in the text is, first, through the dedication at the beginning of the second part of the book, just below the photo of Richieu; a little further on leaning over his desk, Art notes that in May 1987, he and Fraçoise will have a baby. Its presence then is practically invisible, shaped primarily by the relationship it will establish with the past.

FOR RICHIEU



AND FOR NADJA
AND DASHIELL

Figure 07 – "For Richieu – and for Nadja and Dashiell". *Maus*, pg. 165

Unlike Richieu, whose image becomes fully present in history, even though it is not in the same context as Art, Nadja is left as an implied element as a real but distant future; there is no character for her; like Anja her presence not only pervades, but rather depends on the author to exist. Dashiell, even less: his dedication was included after his birth (in 1992), and is even quoted in the book. In *Maus*, Art does not shy away from the responsibility of remembering: by drawing himself as an integral part of his father's story, he takes up the act of reconstituting Vladek's "buried" past, leading him to declare: "I wanted to erase those memories of the war ... until rebuild it all over again with his questions". From the questionnaire, which looks more like an interrogation, *Maus* travels between the generational transmission, by the origins of the author, by the constitution of a real formed by the public and private histories, by the temporal interrelationship, by the problematic of fictionalization, until arriving to the inclusion of the reader as an active part in the process: it is he who will decide which way to follow at the crossroads proposed by the author, just like the characters. Is Art an author in search of his own identity, or someone who cries out for the attention of a father traumatized by his past? Is reading *Maus* a way to follow the story of Vladek or Artie? Was the son genuinely trying to reconstruct the mother's story, or expose it from the moment he included in the story without giving him a chance to respond? What will be Nadja's relationship with his grandfather's and his father's story? In *Maus*, Art not only

avoids answering the questions but also offers clues to various interpretations, without abstaining, while at the same time placing the Shoah as an integral part of his subjectification process.

When questioned by the Polish government about whether or not to keep Auschwitz for future generations, the University of Massachusetts professor of Jewish and English James Young suggested that, in fact, the presence of the concentration camp and other historic buildings is intrinsic to the understanding of the event. However, Young ponders, the effects of the passage of time should not be erased, nor should restorations present themselves as the original artifact: the grass will grow, the trees will bloom and the villages will emerge around what were once symbols of death. It is then up to the visitors to rework and reinterpret the event, while taking into account the current context and dynamics, not only between past and present but also between past, present and future. Therefore, any Holocaust memorial must connect the existential gap between the here-and-now of the tourist and the event (or events) of more than half a century before, besides converting the memorial thing into a living memory, producing encounters.

In *The Texture of Memory* (1993), Young explains that the historical factor itself cannot handle the literal representation of the event, and it needs the presence of the symbolic. It presupposes an interpretation of the observer / reader; their existence and representativeness therefore depend on the other: "However once created the memorials take on lives of their own often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions" (p. 02). For the author, new generations visit memorials under new circumstances and contexts, and consequently invest them with new meanings.

Being thus clothed with the symbolic and projections of future generations, Young points out that, rather than embodying memory, the memorials begin to replace it, returning to Nora in saying that the responsibility to remember is the lieu de mémoire (p. 13), since the so-called "tombstone syndrome" would have imminent effects: without having properly cultivated mourning, survivors create places for imaginary graves, such as memorials. Therefore, the performance of the memorials of the Shoah does not depend on the encounter between history and its representation but rather on what is produced by the union of public and private memory. In general, therefore, the fragility of memory ends up being exposed in its representations: just as some memorials tend to assume the ambiguous role of remembering the event, as well as giving the visitor the task, *Maus* also walks in the same

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