Prof. McKenzie

ENGL 1169: Graphic Novels

Project 4

Zooming In: How Spiegelman Struggles with Thought in *Maus*

The process of creating new ideas and teaching unfamiliar subjects has been a pharmakological struggle that is partly constituted by the media channel used, the resolution of topic, and depth of thinking. Authors are challenged with choosing their approach and finding an effective medium to best share their knowledge while maintaining a positive pharmacological balance. In his graphic novel, *Maus*, we can analyze the concepts Art Spiegelman incorporates to demonstrate his struggle. In general, Spiegelman introduces a unique medium of sharing intergenerational struggles by connecting complex thought with familiar structures; a style of convergent thinking that leads to a high degree of divergent abstraction.

Before examining *Maus*, it is important to note that Art Spiegelman's frame narrative also describes his own struggle living with a concentration camp survivor. Not only are the horrific events described in Vladek's recollection important, but also Art's narrative breaks reveal the lingering trans-generational impact of Jewish persecution; Vladek's story would not be complete if his son was left out if it. For instance, in addition to being fussy

with Art eating everything on his plate [shown above], Vladek is also especially frugal with his

money, despite having plenty, and is always suspicious of his remarried spouse after his money

[shown right] (Spiegelman 42, 126). Throughout *Maus*,

Spiegelman struggles to narrate the transformation of his

father through the setting of Jewish persecution.

Illustrating the "clash" between past and modern

generation helps to decipher the man, Vladek

Spiegelman, by comparing him to a more familiar
generation.

    In examining the scope of *Maus*, it is important to analyze the pharmakological effects that the

author's scope has on the story. In attempting to *think the unthinkable*, a scope that encompasses

too many perspectives can be confusing and distracting for the readers; however, a scope that is

too narrow may fail at conveying enough knowledge suitable for divergent thinking.

Interestingly, *Spiegelman* devotes a large portion of his novel

to creating context for Vladek Spiegelman's storytelling.

Furthermore, Spiegelman uses single-dimensional context in

his novel; he demonstrates the evolution of a single primary

variable—his father—throughout the story. Although the use

of multiple perspectives, such as providing context behind the Polish and Germans may

theoretically provide the audience with a better groundwork for the conflicts present in *Maus*,

Spiegelman sticks to a single-dimensional approach in order not to dilute the story from *his*

father's point of view and to allow the audience to experience the traumatizing effects of

religious persecution. Notably, throughout the novel, Spiegelman highlights the progressive loss of Vladek's wealth. From owning one of the largest textile factories [shown above], to trading jewelry for scraps of food, the audience can understand the taxing effects that money insecurity might have on a man (36). In non-print forms of media, such as online interactive learning tools or virtual laboratories, understanding relationships visually by changing sliders and seeing effects on different graphs and diagrams allows a form of deep thinking that is typically inhibited by complex formulas and principles that are difficult to understand (Victor). Similarly, in *Maus*, Spiegelman narrows down the number of interactives, such as the desperation to find money for food, while providing an expansive range of variables, like illustrating how much Vladek valued food as it progressively costed him more (and eventually buying bread with diamond jewelry). By narrowing the scope of his story, Spiegelman can effectively transform his graphic novel into a handful of interactives.

To further familiarize the characters, Spiegelman uses barn animals to present his audience with a familiar power structure. In the graphics, the Jewish population is represented by mice, Polish as mice, and Germans by cats. In doing so, Spiegelman can intuitively illustrate the Jewish as prey hunted by the German cats; all while the Polish pigs are too preoccupied to care much about either. In fact, Spiegelman even hints towards the Polish beginning to favor the German's side, with Polish children inheriting antisemitic ideas [shown right]; this relationship works within Spiegelman's Pig characterization of the Pigs—lazy and

adherent the oppressive (149). More importantly, Spiegelman uses this structure to demonstrate the high-stakes cat-and-mouse chase repeatedly appearing in the graphic novel. For example, the Jewish "mice" are often portrayed wearing pig when around Polish or German people (152). The divisions between the animals are so strong that not being a German cat or Polish pig results in persecution. On the other hand, in Jewish-smuggler busts, German soldiers wear mouse masks [shown below]. For reasons similar to that of the Jewish wearing Polish masks, Spiegelman allows the reader to understand the doubt and constant 1940s era Jewish people had when fleeing from the Germans (155). Overall, as opposed to creating lengthy rhetoric to explain power struggles in *Maus*, Spiegelman's connects a familiar, barn animal, framework that can quickly abstract to more complex feelings and moods throughout his story.

Why does Spiegelman's approach to narrating the Jewish struggle matter to modern knowledge? To answer that, a pharmakological approach should be taken. In Grosskopf's *Design Thinking Implemented in Software Engineering Tools*, the effectiveness of prototypes comes from "their underlying concepts," and "a sketched representation does not resolve e.g. the actual size of buttons" (Grosskopf 7). Thus, when developing new thought, preconceived ideas of "what should be" prevent one from understanding the important principles of what they are learning. In Spiegelman's approach to *Maus*, he takes a moderately resolved and abstract approach towards describing the transgenerational Jewish struggle. According to Grosskopf's

definition of resolution and abstraction, Spiegelman's abstraction lies in his divergent abstraction from familiar structures to the characterization of the different groups of people; his work is not completely resolved because it is focused primarily on the progression of the plot rather than the realism of the characters (6). From a pharmakological standpoint, Spiegelman's story lacks the explicit details—i.e., faces, detailed events—but makes up the deficit by giving the audience enough context to "know" Vladek well enough to extrapolate his feelings.

From *Maus*, Spiegelman converges relations, structure, and context through a familiar medium to convey thought, as opposed with starting from a wide breadth and investigating individual fragments. When analyzing complex ideas or even the unknown, a semi-abstract semi-resolute model can be used to illustrate a narrow bandwidth of an idea. Spiegelman has demonstrated that a large portion of focus should be dedicated to an individual subject, while the plot, and surround knowledge, should have their clarity adjusted as to not dilute the message. As J.R. R Tolkien once said, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." When inching towards the unknown, sticking close to the familiar minimizes the risks of being left in the dark.

Works Cited

Grosskopf, Alexander, *Design Thinking Implemented in Software Engineering Tools*.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. London, Penguin, 1997.

Victor, Bret. *Media for Thinking the Unthinkable*. 2013. Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/67076984.