Sunaina Ajit Kumar

Dr Gavin Paul

ENGL 3380 S10

November 27th, 2024

A Lacanian Analysis of Art Spiegelman's Maus

Maus by Art Spiegelman is not merely a historical recounting of Holocaust experiences but a deeply layered exploration of the psychological effects of trauma and its transmission across generations. This paper will analyze *Maus* through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on how the Holocaust represents the Lacanian Real and how Vladek and Art Spiegelman navigate this unrepresentable trauma through narrative, memory, and documentation. The paper will argue that while language and storytelling impose a semblance of order (the Symbolic), they remain inherently inadequate tools for processing the incomprehensible trauma of the Holocaust, leaving survivors and their descendants in perpetual states of Desire and Lack. As Moriya Rachmani says in *Testimonies, Liminality Rituals and the Memory of the Self in the Concentration Camps*, "Ritual is defined differently. Victor Turner regards ritual as a fixed, formal form of behaviour that deviates from routine, everyday life and is performed in the framework of a belief in a mystical existence… Ritual plays a role in defining and preserving identity" (77). These concepts will be applied to *Maus* to illuminate the fractured identities, unbridgeable gaps, and unresolved tensions that characterize the relationships between trauma survivors and their descendants. Using Lacanian concepts of the Real, Symbolic, Imaginary, Lack, and Desire, this paper will demonstrate how *Maus* portrays the Holocaust as a

traumatic void that destabilizes identity, disrupts intergenerational understanding, and underscores the limitations of language in capturing the depth of historical atrocities.

The Holocaust stands as an event that defies full comprehension and representation. Its scale and the extremity of its atrocities push it into the realm of the Lacanian Real. It was an experience so overwhelming that it resists integration into the structured systems of language, memory, and consciousness. Survivors like Vladek struggle to process and recount their experiences within the Symbolic while still being haunted by the unsymbolized elements of the Real. The Holocaust, as an instance of the Real, destabilizes conventional frameworks of meaning. Words fail to encapsulate the horror, and attempts to narrate these events are often fragmented or contradictory. As *Maus* demonstrates, even firsthand testimonies are marked by gaps, silences, and a certain detachment, reflecting the impossibility of fully reconciling the Real with the Symbolic. These failures of language are not merely accidental but intrinsic to the nature of trauma as an encounter with the Real. The inability to fully grasp or symbolize the Holocaust gives rise to a pervasive sense of Lack, the void or absence created by the impossibility of directly accessing the Real. For survivors, this manifests as guilt: guilt for surviving when others did not, guilt for failing to save loved ones, and guilt for being unable to articulate or preserve the whole truth of what happened. This sense of incompleteness is transmitted across generations, affecting those who come after.

For Art Spiegelman, this Lack drives a profound Desire to understand his father's experiences and, by extension, the trauma that has shaped his own identity. Art obsessively questions Vladek, collects artifacts, and constructs *Maus* as an attempt to understand the Holocaust. However, this Desire remains unfulfilled, as no amount of evidence or narrative can bridge the gap between Art's life and the incomprehensible horrors endured by his parents. His

pursuit of understanding highlights the futility of trying to grasp the Real through the Symbolic, reinforcing the themes of fragmentation and alienation central to the graphic novel. Survivors like Vladek use narrative as a tool to contain and manage the overwhelming memories of the Holocaust. However, this process inevitably falls short. The unspeakable elements of trauma persist as inconsistencies in their stories. Vladek's deadpan delivery of horrific events reflects this limitation. For the descendants of survivors, like Art, the inadequacy of language creates an additional layer of alienation. Art inherits his father's trauma but cannot fully access or integrate it into his own understanding. This intergenerational dynamic underscores the psychological consequences of the Holocaust as an encounter with the Real: it leaves survivors and their descendants grappling with an absence that cannot be filled, a Desire that cannot be satisfied, and a history that cannot be fully understood or represented. Through its portrayal of these dynamics, *Maus* illustrates how the Holocaust resists comprehension and why this resistance perpetuates cycles of guilt, Desire, and alienation.

Vladek's recounting of his Holocaust experiences often adopts a tone of detachment, bordering on the clinical, as seen in his descriptions of Auschwitz and the deaths of those around him. For example, Vladek casually remarks, "And there's only one way out of here for all of us… Through those chimneys," (Spiegelman II.27.6) or explains the fate of Abraham with chilling indifference: "I think he came out the chimney" (Spiegelman II.27.6). This emotionally distant delivery reflects an unconscious strategy to contain the trauma within the Symbolic order of language, transforming unbearable memories into manageable "facts." Vladek's tone indicates an attempt to suppress or control these traumatic memories, treating them as if they were objective events rather than profoundly personal and devastating experiences. This strategy allows him to revisit the memories without being consumed by the emotional devastation they

carry. However, Vladek's narration often fractures under the weight of what cannot be spoken. While he provides detailed accounts of events, such as roll calls or punishments, these descriptions are often interrupted by gaps, contradictions, or unclear recollections. For instance, when describing a man punished for not standing straight, Vladek admits, "I heard he pushed him down and jumped hard on his neck… or they sent him to the gas, I don't remember" (Spiegelman, II.50.5). This uncertainty reflects the limits of the Symbolic; language falters when tasked with capturing the full horror of trauma. Vladek demonstrates how survivors unconsciously negotiate between the Real and the Symbolic through this fragmentation. The inability to provide clear, coherent accounts is not a failure of memory but an inherent aspect of trauma's resistance to symbolization.

Vladek's reluctance to share certain artifacts, such as his wife's diaries or old photographs, further underscores the fragility of his psychological state. For Vladek, these objects are not just mementos but potential triggers for the Real. Revisiting these materials threatens to destabilize the delicate balance he has achieved by containing his memories within the Symbolic. For instance, after Art repeatedly asks for his mother's diaries, Vladek admits to having destroyed them. These diaries represent a more direct connection to the Real, and Vladek's destruction of them is an act of self-preservation. By eliminating this link to the past, he shields himself from the unbearable emotional impact of fully confronting the trauma. Despite Vladek's attempts to suppress or contain the Real through narrative and action, trauma manifests in ways that disrupt his daily life. His compulsive behaviours, such as hoarding and extreme frugality, are outward symptoms of unresolved anxieties tied to his Holocaust experiences. These behaviours serve as reminders that the Real cannot be entirely suppressed and will continue to exert its influence in ways that bypass language and conscious thought.

Art Spiegelman, as the child of Holocaust survivors, inherits a legacy of trauma that he cannot fully understand or integrate into his own identity. This disconnect creates a sense of inadequacy and alienation from his father and the historical experiences that shaped his family. Art's sense of self is fragmented as he struggles to reconcile his Imaginary with the incomprehensible trauma embodied by his father. Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies this disconnect as a manifestation of Lack, of the impossibility of fully accessing or integrating the Real. Art's inadequacy is most evident in his sessions with his psychiatrist, where he expresses frustration with his inability to bridge the emotional and experiential gap between himself and Vladek. His feelings of guilt for not having shared in his father's suffering amplify his sense of fragmentation. Art internalizes this Lack as a failure of his own understanding, which drives his obsessive Desire to connect with and comprehend the enormity of Vladek's experiences. He lamets “No matter what I accomplish, it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz” (Spiegelman II.44.5). Art badgers Vladek for photos, documents, and artifacts from his father's past, hoping they will provide tangible links to the trauma from which he feels so distant. For Art, these artifacts represent pieces of a puzzle that might help him construct a fuller picture of his father's experiences and, by extension, his own inherited identity. As C Fred Alford in *Subjectivity and the Intergenerational Transmission of Historical Trauma* tells us, "Survivors may be narratively competent and remain traumatized. What really matters is the communication of feeling states, and feeling states are often communicated in a non-verbal, pre-symbolic manner" (262). Lacanian theory interprets this need as an expression of Desire, as an attempt to overcome the Lack created by the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. However, the Real cannot be fully represented or accessed, and no amount of evidence or narrative can close the gap between Art's life and the horrors his parents endured.

The analysis of *Maus* through a Lacanian lens demonstrates the profound and pervasive effects of trauma. The Holocaust, as the Lacanian Real, resists full integration into the Symbolic order of language and narrative. For Vladek, this resistance manifests as fragmented and emotionally detached storytelling. At the same time, for Art, it results in a persistent sense of inadequacy and Desire to bridge the gap between his life and his father's incomprehensible experiences. These disconnected elements are unified in their reflection of the enduring impact of trauma and the inadequacy of language to encapsulate it. As part of the Symbolic, language attempts to impose order and structure on the chaos of trauma, but as *Maus* illustrates, this effort is inherently limited. Vladek's fragmented accounts and Art's frustration with his father's tone and omissions show the inability of narrative to fully represent the Real. Even the graphic novel format itself, with its visual and textual elements, acknowledges these limits, using visual metaphors and stylistic choices to hint at the incomprehensible void that language and memory cannot capture. This inadequacy is not a failure of the characters or the medium but a reflection of the nature of trauma itself. The Real defies symbolization, leaving survivors and their descendants to navigate its effects through incomplete and often contradictory means. Lack and Desire are central to Vladek's and Art's responses to the Holocaust. For Vladek, the Lack is tied to the loss of his loved ones, his pre-war life, and the ability to integrate his trauma fully into his identity. His Desire to impose structure through storytelling and hoarding behaviours reflects his attempts to manage this void. For Art, the Lack is an inability to connect with his father's experiences and a feeling of alienation from the weight of the Holocaust's legacy. His obsessive drive to collect artifacts and tell the story in *Maus* reflects his own Desire to reconcile this absence, even as he grapples with its impossibility.

Maus also reveals the complex dynamics of intergenerational trauma. While Vladek's survival strategies help him navigate his trauma, they often clash with Art's need for understanding and emotional connection. This tension highlights the profound ways in which trauma persists within families, shaping identities and relationships in ways that are both unspoken and inescapable. Art's inability to fully grasp or integrate his father's trauma into his own life underscores the gap between survivor and descendant. *Maus* positions this disconnect not as a failure but an inevitable consequence of the Real's resistance to symbolization. By applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to *Maus*, this essay underscores the universal challenges of representing trauma and confronting historical atrocities. The Real's disruption of the Symbolic is not unique to the Holocaust but is a feature of all experiences that defy comprehension. The persistent Lack and unfulfilled Desire that characterize both Vladek's and Art's responses to trauma reflect broader human struggles with memory, narrative, and identity. Through its portrayal of these dynamics, *Maus* becomes a meditation on the nature of trauma, the limits of language, and the enduring power of the past to shape the present. The graphic novel demonstrates that while language and narrative can provide some structure, they remain incomplete tools for grappling with the unspeakable. In this way, *Maus* affirms the importance of confronting trauma, even as it acknowledges the impossibility of fully understanding it.

Works Cited

Fred Alford, C. "Subjectivity and the Intergenerational Transmission of Historical Trauma: Holocaust Survivors and their Children." *Critical Psychology (Lawrence & Wishart)*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2015, pp. 261-282.

Rachmani, Moriya. "Testimonies, Liminality Rituals and the Memory of the Self in the Concentration Camps." *Dapim (Haifa)*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2016, pp. 75-92.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale.* Pantheon Books, 1986.