

The Art of *Maus*: Self-Representation and Confession in the Graphic Novel

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¹ It would be beyond the scope of this article to address all these publications. For readings that do acknowledge Art Spiegelman's central role in narrating *Maus* (albeit not in connection to his other confessional works), see for example Levine, (317-41) or Miller Budick, (379-98)

Introduction

As the first comic book ever to win a Pulitzer Prize (in 1992), *Maus* has received massive attention since its publication, from audiences worldwide as well as from critics and academics. A majority of publications is focused on issues concerning trauma, memory and the (im)possibility of representation. These approaches tend to analyze *Maus* as a biography. This is certainly a justified angle, as *Maus* is indeed an attempt to describe and depict the life, times, and traumas of Spiegelman's father Vladek as survivor of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, *Maus* also records the life of Art Spiegelman himself, his struggle in coping with Vladek's trauma and putting it to paper without vulgarizing it. In this sense *Maus* is just as much an autobiography as a biography.¹

In foregrounding the fabric of the text and images, Spiegelman reflects on the process of creating the comic. This strategy frustrates a biographical interpretation. This essay therefore considers *Maus* as an

autobiographical work. My analysis will place *Maus* in the bigger context of other works by Spiegelman that are also of a confessional nature, and together with *Maus* make up a potentially endless confessional *œuvre* in comic form. The comic inside *Maus*, entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” functions as an indicator of *Maus*’ confessional nature. Thus, it takes up the structure of a *mise-en-abyme*; a literary structuring principle in which the meaning of a smaller part is echoed in the bigger totality by which it is encapsulated. I see this confession as an abymical structure, a quicksand into which Spiegelman sinks deeper with every publication. Paul de Man has analyzed confession as *mise-en-abyme*, calling it “an epistemological use of *language*.” (279, emphasis added) It is exactly because language is employed that confession fails. The confessing speaker who tries to come to a closure is frustrated by the very means he uses to reach this closure, namely language. A key feature of language is that it always harbours an element of resistance to closure which the speaker (or reader) tries to suppress in order to give meaning. But this element does not let itself be suppressed; there is always something escaping the confession. This leaves the speaker unsatisfied. A second confession is needed which will invariably fail and point to the need for a third confession, and so on. But if *Maus* can be regarded as a confession, it would mean that Spiegelman also confesses in imagery. With regard to the medium of *Maus*, several questions arise then: can one confess in imagery? Is it different from a literary confession? Do words and images exclude or complement each other? Is a visual confession also doomed to become a *mise-en-abyme*?

Biography or Autobiography

In considering *Maus* as a biography the most attention is given to Vladek’s story. From this angle, it is the first-hand account of the horrors of Auschwitz that makes this book a valuable document. We as readers and non-witnesses learn something from the book about the war experience. But the term *biography* also presupposes that the events precede the narrative they make up. However, I assert that there is no way to analyze *Maus* properly without paying attention to the comic medium and its influence on the form this story has taken in becoming a narrative. Strictly speaking, there cannot be any event in the narrative sense prior to the narrative itself, as its events come into being as the narrative develops. Hence, an analysis of a narrative cannot surpass this form and only analyze the event’s content. This especially goes for a comic like *Maus* in which the narrator and the activity of narration play such a prominent role. And as this narrative structure cannot be

2 In the case of *Maus*, it is difficult to distinguish between Art Spiegelman's roles as narrator and author. Nevertheless, I have tried to set the two apart as much as possible by using "Art" to indicate the fictional character, and "Spiegelman" to indicate the author.

3 A similar reading could be made of the subtitle to part I, "My Father Bleeds History." *Bleeding* firstly signifies the pain that history has caused Vladek, a pain that he still feels today (as the present tense indicates). But *bleeding* is also comic jargon. A bleed is a panel without a black frame, which gives the reader the impression that "time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space." (McCloud, 103) This technique is frequently used in *Maus*. So the word *bleeding* signifies the ever continuing pain caused by the Holocaust, both on a textual and a visual level.

surpassed, neither can Spiegelman² be as its creator. He finds out that it is impossible for him to have Vladek confess about his life without confessing himself. He may give his father room to tell his own story, ultimately it will always come to the reader mediated via him. So although the angle of biography can deliver useful interpretations, it neglects the form in its focus on the content, and in doing so neglects Spiegelman as the interpreter of these biographical facts. It is he who turns them into events with the creation of the narrative. In *Maus*, Spiegelman himself reflects on the construction of the narrative. This act of reflection is conducted in two ways: by stressing the hyperpersonal character of the story and by repeatedly drawing attention to the art of storytelling itself.

Firstly, the particularity of *Maus* is indicated in the subtitle "a survivor's tale." A close reading shows the double meaning of this title; indicating the subjectivity of both Art and his father.³ Firstly it could be read as "*a survivor's tale*." In this sense, Vladek Spiegelman is regarded as one survivor among many. There are numerous stories to be told about Auschwitz, all just as shocking and horrible. *Maus* happens to tell the story of Vladek, how *he* experienced the Second World War under *his* circumstances. He himself could not have told it in any other way. Secondly, the subtitle could also be read as "*a survivor's tale*." This option does not only draw attention to the transformation Vladek's memories have undergone in becoming a narrative (or "tale," it also makes clear that there are many different narratives that can be composed from the memories of Vladek. *Maus* is only one of those possibilities, the interpretation that Spiegelman junior has made. This option highlights the personal

influence that he has had on the material. *He* could not have told this story in any other way either.

This focus on subjectivity continues in the narrative itself. By exposing his father's narrative as faulty or incomplete, Spiegelman shows that this "tale" cannot be viewed as an objective account of the Second World War (if such a thing would ever be possible). At the beginning of *Maus* Vladek almost refuses his son to tell his story. (Spiegelman 1986: 12) When he does start speaking, he cannot tell a straightforward story because his memory fails him (Spiegelman 1986, 20) and because he does not speak English fluently. The narrative is also interrupted in a number of ways. Sometimes Art and Vladek start arguing over something futile, such as when Art drops ashes on the carpet. (Spiegelman 1986, 52) At other moments they accidentally change subjects, or Art interrupts his father with questions, thus upsetting the chronology of the story. (Spiegelman 1986, 47, 82) At these moments the visual narrative is also interrupted by panels showing Vladek and Art sitting together, the latter writing in a notebook or holding a tape recorder. (Spiegelman 1986, 26, 29, 30) These interruptions constantly remind the reader of the fact that a story does not write itself. It is not objective, straightforward, or logical because the human subject mediates and interprets information. These interruptions constantly remind the reader of the unique and subjective narratological situation Vladek and Art find themselves in. They make retrospective comments on the story, both from their own points of view. This puts the story in a contemporary perspective, and allows for both the personal angle of Vladek and Art to be observed by the reader. As Art is the narrator with his father speaking only from an embedded position, these interruptions indicate that Art must involve himself in a story by / about his father.

As Vladek struggles in telling the tale, so does Art. When he remarks to his father: "Writing things down is just too hard," (Spiegelman 1986, 73) this simple remark can be interpreted in at least three ways. Firstly, it directly refers to the situation in which Art utters this. He finds the physical strain of writing too much so he buys a tape recorder. Secondly, it articulates that the creation of narrative out of Vladek's stories is difficult for Art. And lastly, it calls attention to the comic situation again: if solely *writing* things down is hard, then perhaps *writing* and *drawing* might be easier. There are various moments in the comic where the story halts in order to reflect on its creation. For example, Art's wife Françoise complicates the visual Jews-as-mice metaphor as she is French but has converted to the Jewish religion. (see figure 1, Spiegelman 1991, 11)

This strategy reveals the difficulties Spiegelman encounters in putting his and his father's experiences into comic form. But the most important part of *Maus* where Spiegelman's struggle can be seen is "Prisoner on the Hell Planet." (see figure 3, pages 76-79)



Figure 1

"Prisoner on the Hell Planet" as Mise-en-abyme

The four-page story "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" was first published in *Short Order Comix* in 1973, and incorporated unaltered into the text of *Maus*. Moreover, it is also inserted into the story of *Maus*, occupying four pages in between a discussion held by Art and Mala (Vladek's second wife). (Spiegelman 1986, 100-103) This comic is a deeply personal narrative about Art's mother's suicide. In both form and content it clearly stands out from the rest of the *Maus*-narrative. It is printed on black pages instead of the usual white, and its expressionist style is totally different from the rest of *Maus*. It abandons the animal metaphor in depicting all people as people. Its content also differs from the larger comic, as it centres on Spiegelman's mother and not on his father. The story relates how his mother Anja committed suicide in 1968, leaving no note. Spiegelman blamed himself for her death, and felt blamed by others too. As a doomed prisoner of the Hell planet, Art accuses his

mother of burdening him with a life-long trauma. He tries to figure out her reasons for killing herself. Had she stated them, Art supposes he would not have blamed himself for her death. But as her suicide remains unsolved, his guilt stays. In the bigger story of *Maus*, the *absence* of Anja is a minor theme compared to the *presence* of Vladek. Nevertheless, there are various moments in the story where Anja is mentioned, mostly in connection to her war diaries. Vladek has burned all these diaries, causing Art to fall out with his father and even call him a “murderer.” (Spiegelman 1986, 159) Vladek has robbed Spiegelman of the opportunity to bring his mother back to life in this Holocaust narrative. Spiegelman cannot tell her story because he has not read her stories. Anja gets murdered a second time, this time on a literary level. *Maus* may be Spiegelman’s way of reconciling with his father; his mother remains absent. This means that the guilt he feels that was expressed in “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” is not relieved by the confession of *Maus* either. Thus, as a *mise-en-abyme*, “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” shows the absence of Spiegelman’s mother, which is echoed in the bigger story of *Maus*.

The *mise-en-abyme* can be noticed on a visual level in the title panel of “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” showing a hand holding a photograph in a similar way a hand is shown holding the bottom of the page. This former hand also draws attention to the peculiarity of the insertion of a photograph into the text. One might wonder why Spiegelman has not just drawn his mother. Elsewhere he explains his outlook on photographic images with regard to Richieu, his elder brother who died before Art was born: “He was mainly a large blurry photograph hanging in my parent’s bedroom ... The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble ... It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass.” (Spiegelman 1991, 15)



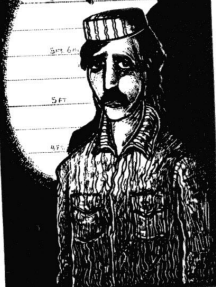
Figure 2



MY FATHER FOUND HER WHEN HE GOT HOME FROM WORK... HER WRISTS SLASHED AND AN EMPTY BOTTLE OF PILLS NEARBY...

I WAS LIVING WITH MY PARENTS, AS I AGREED TO DO ON MY RELEASE FROM THE STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL 3 MONTHS BEFORE.

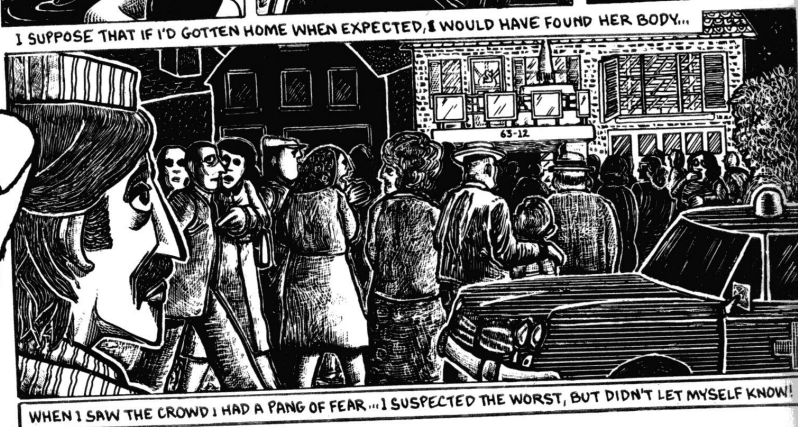
IN 1968, WHEN I WAS 20, MY MOTHER KILLED HERSELF. SHE LEFT NO NOTE.



I'D JUST SPENT THE WEEKEND WITH MY GIRLFRIEND, ISABELLA. (MY PARENTS DIDN'T LIKE HER.) I WAS LATE GETTING HOME...



I SUPPOSE THAT IF I'D GOTTEN HOME WHEN EXPECTED, I WOULD HAVE FOUND HER BODY...



WHEN I SAW THE CROWD, I HAD A PANG OF FEAR... I SUSPECTED THE WORST, BUT DIDN'T LET MYSELF KNOW!

Figure 3

A COUSIN HERDED ME AWAY FROM THE SCENE. DOCTOR ORENS LIVED NEARBY...



COME TO THE DOCTOR'S...
YOUR MOTHER IS -AH- SICK!...
HE WILL EXPLAIN.....



SIT DOWN, ARTHUR... I
THOUGHT I SHOULD BE
THE ONE TO TELL YOU...



YOUR MOTHER KILLED HER-
SELF - SHE'S DEAD!

I COULD AVOID THE TRUTH NO LONGER - THE DOCTOR'S WORDS CLATTERED INSIDE ME.... I FELT CONFUSED, I FELT ANGRY, I FELT NUMB! ... I DIDN'T EXACTLY FEEL LIKE CRYING, BUT FIGURED I SHOULD!...



SHE'S DEAD!
A SUICIDE!



NOW, NOW, BOY...

NO, LET HIM
CRY - IT'S GOOD
FOR HIM!

WE WENT HOME... MY FATHER HAD COM-
PLETELY FALLEN APART!



OY ARTIE! WHY? WHY?
SUCH A TRAGEDY? AND
NOT EVEN A NOTE!!!

I WAS EXPECTED TO
COMFORT **HIM**!



MOTHER...
MOTHER...

SOMEHOW THE FUNERAL ARRANGE-
MENTS WERE MADE...



...AND FOR \$950⁰⁰ WE HAVE A
BRONZE CASKET WITH BRONZE-
COLORED VELVET... OF COURSE.
FOR \$2,000⁰⁰ WE CAN...

PROTECT
WHAT YOU
HAVE

THAT NIGHT WAS BAD... MY FATHER INSISTED WE SLEEP ON THE FLOOR-AN OLD JEWISH CUSTOM, I GUESS. HE HELD ME AND MOANED TO HIMSELF ALL NIGHT. I WAS UNCOMFORTABLE... WE WERE SCARED!



THE NEXT DAY AT THE FUNERAL HOME WAS WORSE...



יתגדל ויתקדש
שמה רבא בעלמא

MY FATHER FOUGHT FOR SELF-CONTROL AND PRAYED... I WAS PRETTY SPACED OUT IN THOSE DAYS - I RECITED TO MY MOTHER FROM THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD!

די ברא ברעטנה וימליך



"O NOBLY BORN... IN YOUR JOURNEY THROUGH THE FORMLESS VOID, REMEMBER THE UNITY OF ALL LIVING THINGS..."



ANNA ANNA AN



IT WAS TOO MUCH - I HAD TO LEAVE...

ANNA ANNA AN

A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY FOUND ME OUT IN THE HALL...



NOW YOU CRY!
BETTER YOU CRIED
WHEN YOUR MOTHER
WAS STILL ALIVE!

I FELT NAUSEOUS THE GUILT WAS OVERWHELMING!



THE NEXT WEEK WE SPENT IN MOURNING...
MY FATHER'S FRIENDS ALL OFFERED ME
HOSTILITY MIXED IN WITH THEIR CONDO-
LENCES...

...BUT, FOR THE MOST PART, I WAS
LEFT ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS...

I REMEMBERED THE LAST TIME I SAW HER...

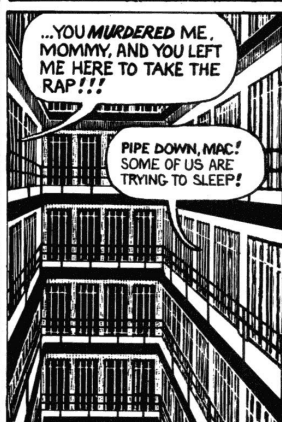
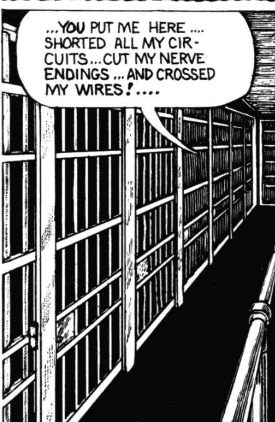


SHE CAME INTO MY ROOM...IT WAS
LATE AT NIGHT

...I TURNED AWAY, RESENTFUL OF THE WAY
SHE TIGHTENED THE UMBILICAL CORD...



WELL, MOM, IF YOU'RE LISTENING ...



It seems that the photograph of the mother functions in the same way as this photo of Richieu. Normally, viewing a portrait of a deceased loved one is a positive experience: it seems to revive the memory of that person. But for Spiegelman, it is totally different: it signifies a person who is gone but still exercises influence on the living; and so it becomes an emblem he incessantly fights against. Spiegelman invests these two photos with such power they become evidence against him, symbols of his guilt. The comic medium is not able to fulfil this function with words or images, but allows for the existence of such photographic evidence within its text.

I have explained earlier that a *mise-en-abyme* indicates that a part of the work meaningfully reflects upon the whole. In this case it is the inserted comic that shows the same guilt issues Spiegelman tries to show us in *Maus*. Mieke Bal writes that “the embedded story contains a suggestion how the text should be read.” (59) In this case “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” suggests that an analysis of *Maus* as biography is not the only possibility. A reading of the comic as a testimony to Spiegelman’s everlasting guilt about his mother’s suicide and absence is also possible. As such, “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” also points to the further confessions of Spiegelman. The existence of more material directly related to this issue signifies that Spiegelman has not been able to confess satisfyingly yet. That is why after these two works more comics by Spiegelman follow on the same subject.



Maus II, “Mein Kampf,” and “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?!”

One might wonder why *Maus* consists of two parts. An important reason for this might be that *Maus II* (also published at a significantly later date) reflects on the content and the success of *Maus I*. It is especially the chapter “Auschwitz (Time Flies)” that gives more insight into the figure of Spiegelman and the guilt that haunts him. (Spiegelman 1991, 41-42) It opens with several panels showing a human Art wearing a mouse mask, indicating that he is stepping aside from his regular visual avatar. He conveys to the reader how “time flies” by listing several dates connected with the story of *Maus*: “In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success. . . . In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) Lately, I’ve been

C H A P T E R T W O



Time flies...



Figure 4

This quote points to two causes for Spiegelman's depression, and links them up into the same "time chain." Firstly, there is the enormous success of *Maus*. It may seem strange that success makes Spiegelman depressed, but he explains later: "I can't work. My time is being sucked up by interviews and business propositions I can't deal with." (Spiegelman 1991, 43) The subsequent page shows him being harassed by several interviewers and businessmen who indeed take up

4 These flies are also depicted on the frontispiece of chapter two of the second *Maus* volume.

Spiegelman's working time. This depresses him so much that he shrinks to child size under all this pressure and starts crying. Here again he connects the success of *Maus* with his mother's absence, as the child size Art cries out: "I want... ABSOLUTION. No... No... I want... I want... my MOMMY!" (see figure 5, Spiegelman 1991, 42) This statement directly refers back to the confession we saw earlier in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet." I considered this first comic an attempt to gain absolution, as Spiegelman felt responsible for his mother's suicide. Here he acknowledges that rather than to be granted absolution – which according to Coetzee is "the indispensable goal of all confession" (194) – he simply would like his mother back. As *Maus* also thematizes the absence of his mother, the success of *Maus* constantly reminds Spiegelman of this lack. This is a vicious circle: the more success he has, the more depressed he gets over his mother's absence, the more he wants his mother back, the more he will confess, the more success he will have etcetera.

On a visual level, "time flies" literally in the shape of several flies buzzing around Art's head on the chapter's first page.⁴ The bottom panel shows that the flies are also indicators of the mice corpses piled up under his drawing table. So visually, Spiegelman's comic success is literally built on the Holocaust. The flies will reappear at the end of the chapter where Art gets "bugged" by insects. He decides to kill them off with bug spray, remarking: "these damn bugs are eating me alive." (Spiegelman 1991, 74) Apart from showing the ease with which other beings are regarded as inferior and gassed *en masse* (in the same way Nazis gassed Jews), this is also an extension of the time metaphor. If time is represented by flies, Art's line indicates that it is *time* that is eating

him alive. All these dates he named at the opening of the chapter served to indicate that time continually catches up with Spiegelman and causes him to confess over and over again. Time does not let itself be killed off with bug spray. It continues evermore, and therefore Spiegelman must continue confessing.



Figure 5

In 1996, Spiegelman published a cartoon entitled “Mein Kampf” in *New York Times Magazine*. It shows his reaction to the tremendous success of *Maus* and his fear of becoming a one-trick pony. This cartoon sees Art being chased by a giant mouse, saying: “I still prowls that murky caverns of my memory, but now I feel like there’s a 5,000 pound mouse breathing down my neck!” (Spiegelman, quoted in Geis 6) According to this cartoon, then, Spiegelman’s guilt has not dissolved with the publication of *Maus*. On the contrary, the fact that it was such a critical and commercial success has confirmed him in his opinion that he has become a major artist and money-maker at the cost of millions of innocent people who died in the Holocaust. Thus even more guilt is produced than existed before: apart from the guilt that Spiegelman already felt over the death of his mother there is now also the guilt over the profits he has made. This guilt will also prove to be without end: the more praise for his work, the more guilty Spiegelman feels. The one-trick pony principle only adds to this guilt: the more the general opinion sees Spiegelman solely as the creator of *Maus*, the more Spiegelman will be continually reminded of the guilt that *Maus* has brought him.

The year 2005 saw the publication of the first instalment of his series “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?!” The cover of the publication indeed sports a portrait of the artist. His eyes, nose, and mouth are absent. Instead, there is only a scribble, which is explained at the beginning of the comic as a scribble his mother made for the young Spiegelman. Thus while Spiegelman cannot tell his father’s tale without telling his own, he also cannot tell his own tale without telling his mother’s. The comic centres around Spiegelman’s mental breakdown, relating painful childhood memories and the ways they worked through in his adult life. He also reflects upon the making of “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” again stating that his mother killed herself. (“Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?!” 1, 15) Art acknowledges that although that comic helped him deal with his mother’s suicide, it did not prevent him from suffering from a nervous breakdown thirty-three years later. (“Portrait” 1, 18) The last but one paragraph reflects further on the impossibility of undoing trauma by drawing comics. Here a hardboiled detective character follows Art around, remarking: “I tailed the little squirt as he got lost in the squalid labyrinths of his past. He kept ducking from one memory to another trying to locate the moments that shaped and misshaped him!” (“Portrait” 1, 24) The fact that “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?!” has become an autobiographical series⁵ points towards the fact that Spiegelman’s trauma will never be solved by his confessions, and moreover that he is well aware of this.

5 To this date *Virginia Quarterly Review* has published three sequels ("Portrait" 2, 3, and 4). Extensive analysis of these is beyond the scope of this short article.

I started this analysis with the assertion that *Maus* is just as much an autobiography as a biography. Discussing this comic in the context of Spiegelman's other work, it becomes clear that *Maus* is only one of many parts in the chain of guilt that can be seen throughout these confessions. This chain can be understood as a *mise-en-abyme* in which *Maus* is only the second confession after "Prisoner on the Hell Planet." Both these confessions leave Spiegelman unsatisfied, thus urging him to do more work on the same topic. In *Maus II*, "Mein Kampf" and "Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?*" Spiegelman confesses further, both about the initial guilt and about the guilt that later confessions have established along the way. In this attempt to make these confessions work for him, Spiegelman has profoundly influenced the comic landscape and the genre of the graphic novel. His work acknowledges both the incapability of the comic as medium for exhaustive confession, while the same time expanding the possibilities of the medium in order to make it more suitable for confession.

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SUMMARY

This article discusses Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as a comic autobiography. The inserted comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" functions as a *mise-en-abyme*, pointing to a possibly endless process of confession and forgiveness Spiegelman is engaged in. *Maus* therefore must be read in the context of Spiegelman's other confessional works, such as "Mein Kampf" and the "Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?*" series. Furthermore, Spiegelman's crucial intertwinement of word and image in his confession complicates discussions of confession as a purely linguistic phenomenon.

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