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## Animal Masks And Racial Legibility: Anthropomorphism As Semiotic Protest In Maus And Persepolis

<sup>1</sup>Ms. Ridhima Bhagat, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Angana Datta

<sup>1</sup>Master's Student, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor Grade II

<sup>12</sup>MA VEA&C (Visual Effects, Animation & Comics), Amity School of Film & Drama,  
Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Abstract:** This investigation undertakes a comparative semiotic examination of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), two graphic narratives that demonstrate how anthropomorphism and non-human allegory function as artistic strategies for healing and reconciliation following traumatic experiences. The study posits that the employment of zoomorphism and stylized figuration in both works transcends aesthetic simplification, representing semiotic acts of protest—conscious visual decisions that align with the dehumanizing principles of the regimes they critique.

By applying concepts from visual social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen), trauma theory (Caruth, Herman), and postmemory studies (Hirsch), this article reveals the animal mask in *Maus* and the simple human figure in *Persepolis* as ethical and political tools, which allow the audience to come face to face with genocide and theocratic oppression without the numbing effect of realistic images. The comparison shows that the two works share similarities, particularly in the ethical role of abstraction, but at the same time, differ from one another quite significantly in the way each constructs racial legibility and survivor identity through its particular visual language.

**Index Terms** — Anthropomorphism, semiotic protest, graphic memoir, trauma representation, visual semiotics, *Maus*, *Persepolis*.

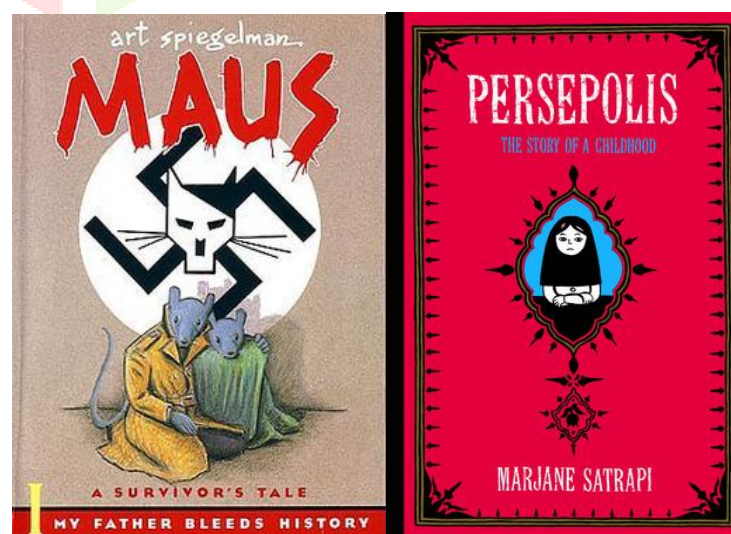


Figure A: Cover of *Maus* Vol. I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History by Art Spiegelman, Pantheon Books, 1986. The iconic image of mice fleeing beneath a swastika-shaped cat silhouette

*immediately establishes the zoomorphic allegory central to the work. Reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use.*

*Figure B: Cover of Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon Books, 2003. Satrapi's bold black-and-white self-portrait in a veil establishes the minimalist visual register of the memoir. Reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a sense, the graphic novel is still primarily equated with a form of childish entertainment, but there are numerous examples of the graphic novel's ability to portray the inexpressible—those horrific events and personal sufferings that cannot be fully captured by literary language—over the last few decades. Two publications have become the focal point of this debate: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a two-volume memoir describing his father Vladek's Holocaust survival, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a first-person account of a childhood before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. They both have been the subject of considerable academic work, but their common semiotic mechanisms are rarely examined together, particularly the use of non-human or highly stylized figures to address the ethical and political aspects of the traumatic representation.

The main issue that this paper puts forward is: In which way does the conscious breaking away from photorealistic human figure—exemplified by animal allegory in *Maus* and by the use of sharp, simplified icons in *Persepolis*—constitute a conscious act of semiotic protest? Here, the expression "semiotic protest" refers to a visual tactic that denies and overturns the representational logic of the very oppressive systems that the two narratives depict. The Nazis labeled Jews as vermin; Spiegelman reverses that very labeling. The Islamic Republic of Iran covered women's faces to hide their personalities; Satrapi's daring black-and-white images show visually and internally the female figures. Choosing how to portray humans is a political action in both situations.

This paper consists of five main parts. After examining the theoretical literature, the method section is presented. Next, each of the two works is discussed separately. Then, a comparative analysis highlights the main points of agreement and disagreement. In the end, the paper considers the wider consequences of these strategies on trauma studies and comics scholarship.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarship on the connection between comics and trauma has expanded dramatically since the 1990s. A key part of this paper's argument is three interrelated bodies of theory: visual social semiotics, trauma studies, and postmemory studies.

The visual grammar framework by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which was extended in the book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), gives us the means to interpret how the compositional and representational decisions in each picture bring about the meaning. Their ideas of "social distance" (the level of closeness or intimacy that the image scale conveys) and "salience" (those aspects of an image that the viewer's attention is most powerfully drawn to) are extremely useful here. When used for a graphic memoir, such concepts help to explain how the selection of the icon—whether it be a mouse-faced Jew or a small, round-faced Iranian girl—sets the reader's relationship with the subject and influences the emotional and ethical tone of the reading experience.

The area of trauma theory owes much of its methodology to the writings of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. According to Caruth, a traumatic event leaves a person in a state of "belatedness" at first; they cannot fully comprehend what happened, and their mind keeps bringing it back in pieces, through symptoms, and through repetitions. Herman's viewpoint that the way trauma is stored in memory is fragmented and not linear to a large extent matches the nature of sequential art which is capable of depicting different times at once on the same page [2]. By extension, any medium that wants to communicate trauma is not only writing about it, but showing very directly the state of fragmentation that it is in.

Postmemory is a concept that Marianne Hirsch introduced in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012). It refers to the kind of relationship that the generation born after survivors has with the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of the memories so intense and alive that they seem to be a kind of "memory" even though they are transmitted through story, image, and behavior [3]. In a sense, Spiegelman's having to painstakingly put together his father's testimony is an example of postmemorial work.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) gives the technical terms to discuss how readers interpret the visual elements of a comic. His idea of the "masking effect"—that is, the use of simple, iconic faces

as a kind of "vacuum" that pulls the reader's identity into the character—is certainly the key to understanding the choice of both authors, Spiegelman and Satrapi, to refrain from using photorealistic faces [4]. The point McCloud makes about how the simpler the face is, the more it can be identified with universally, also sheds light on the ethical and rhetorical power of using abstraction in graphic memoirs. Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010) and *Disaster Drawn* (2016) place both *Maus* and *Persepolis* under the broader category of comics as a form of witness literature, making the case that the graphic medium's very special ability to keep word and image in a kind of tension makes it the most suitable way to depict historical trauma. Chute points out the "architectonic" nature of the comics page—that is, how even the panel layout is a meaning-bearing element [5]. This work of hers provides the theoretical basis that informs the comparative analysis presented in this paper.



Figure C: Theoretical Framework Underpinning The Comparative Analysis

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on a qualitative, multimodal semiotic methodology, a method that involves a thorough examination of specific pages and sequences of the texts, together with a theoretical perspective primarily grounded in the aforementioned works. Three main themes which have been central to both works have emerged from the analysis and form the basis of the discussion: (a) the portrayal of racial or ethnic identity through visual iconography; (b) the role of abstraction as a moral register in the context of historical violence; and (c) the connection of visual style with the depiction of power. The choice of case study sequences is based on a criterion of representativeness—those pages and panels are selected that most vividly demonstrate the semiotic strategies under discussion.

The main focus of the analysis of *Maus* is on the animal allegory's establishment in Volume I, its disruption in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," and the meta-fictional sequences in Volume II, where Spiegelman openly questions his own representational decisions. In the case of *Persepolis*, the paper focuses on the opening sequences that establish Satrapi's visual style, the depictions of state violence, and the instances in which Satrapi's representation of herself as a small, round-faced girl is contrasted with the overwhelming symbolic machinery of the revolutionary state.

It is recognized that the two texts discussed are accessible in translation of course, and that semiotic meaning can be shaped culturally in such ways that even a single-author analysis cannot fully cover it. However, since *Maus* and *Persepolis* are mainly graphic narratives, where the pictures convey the messages that can hardly be explained through words alone, and since both have been extensively enjoyed in their English versions as well as in their mother tongues, this disadvantage is probably not unmanageable for the current research purposes.

### IV. ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 The Animal Allegory in *Maus*: Racial Legibility and Semiotic Subversion

Some may argue that one of the most immediate and attention-grabbing features of *Maus* is the fact that Spiegelman chose to represent different national and ethnic groups as various species of animals: Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, and Swedes as reindeer. On one hand, this choice can be seen as a simple imitation of the typical animal fable once used by Aesop, where animals served as persons of particular social types. On the other hand, the use of animal allegory in *Maus* serves a purpose much more multi-layered and politically provocative than could be inferred from such a tradition. *Maus*'s animal allegory cleverly exploits the racial logic of Nazism by redirecting it against itself.

As part of their dehumanization strategy, the Nazis identified Jews with vermin—mice, rats, and other insects—so as to make the extermination of a people appear both hygienic and necessary through a propaganda machine. Taking that categorization one step further, Spiegelman ends up exposing its artificiality. Unlike in the Nazi propaganda, the mice in *Maus* are not vermin but rather human beings in all senses of the word, with names, memories, desires, and moral complexities. Through the very act of turning a mouse into a character, a reader can empathize with—that is, through what McCloud calls the masking effect—Spiegelman turns the dehumanizing label of the Nazis into its opposite.

**Table I: Semiotic Mapping of the Animal Allegory in *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986–1991)**

| Animal   | Group Represented | Semiotic Function                                                |
|----------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mouse    | Jews              | Exposes Nazi 'vermin' propaganda; enforces reader identification |
| Cat      | Nazis             | Natural predator; power asymmetry made visible                   |
| Pig      | Poles             | Historical tension; ambiguous wartime allegiance                 |
| Dog      | Americans         | Rescuer/liberator; loyal protector role                          |
| Reindeer | Swedes            | Neutral, distant; geographic and moral remove                    |

The allegory is, however, intentionally unstable. Spiegelman doesn't give the reader a chance to get used to a comfortable interpretation of the animal faces as simple, transparent codes. There are moments throughout the story when the characters are even literally shown as wearing animal masks. This is a visual cue that the "mouse" identity is a performance, an imposed label rather than a natural fact [6]. In Volume II, when Spiegelman portrays himself at his drawing board trying to figure out what animal to give Vladek's French friends—who are Jewish, but French—the allegory visibly collapses, and Spiegelman contemplates agonizingly on the page which animal face to assign to them [5]. This meta-fictional break reveals what is always implied in the allegory: racial categories are not depictions of nature but are acts of power.

Figure D: *Maus* Vol. II, pp. 41–42. Art Spiegelman depicts himself at his drawing board surrounded by discarded mouse masks, visually foregrounding the constructed and performative nature of the zoomorphic allegory. This meta-fictional panel makes explicit what is always implied: the animal face is an imposed representational label, not a natural identity. From *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, Pantheon



One  
very

radical change of the allegory is the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" chapter—a raw, German Expressionist-style comic strip with the characters drawn as humans instead of animals. This chapter, which is about Spiegelman's mother's suicide, is like an aesthetic shock that breaks the smoothness of the animal narrative. It affects the reader by making them realize that the animal faces all the time in the narrative are nothing but a representational strategy—like a mask—and that human beings behind the mask are the ones whose suffering is total and cannot be diminished. The allegory, by this way, remains as an ethical demand: the animal faces, on one hand, give the psychological distance the reader needs to be able to delve into the narrative without being overwhelmed while on the other hand, the break in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" shows that this distance is always temporary and that the human reality it represents keeps pushing through.

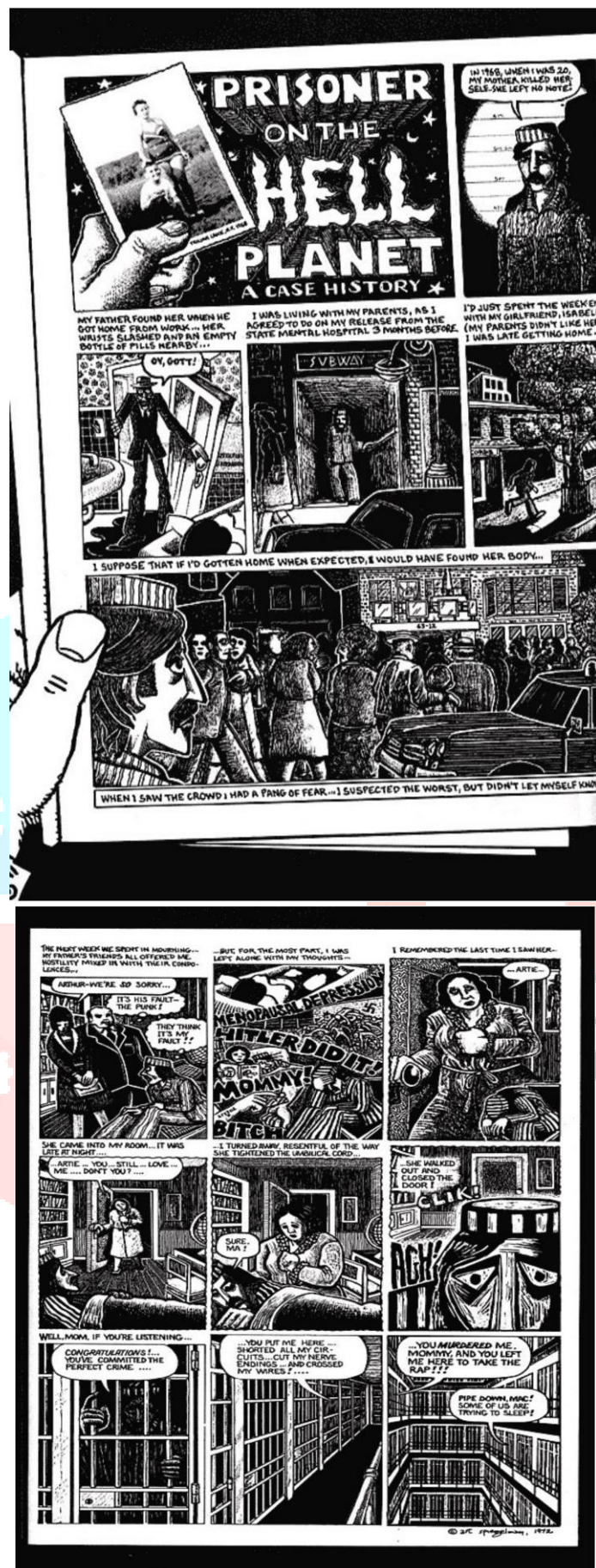


Figure E: Maus Vol. I, pp. 100–103. The "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" chapter, rendered in a raw German Expressionist style with human rather than animal figures, depicts the suicide of Spiegelman's mother, Anja. The stark shift from zoomorphic representation to human faces functions as an aesthetic rupture, reminding the reader that animal masks are always a representational strategy and that total human suffering lies beneath them. From *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, Pantheon Books, 1986. Reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use.

### Spatial Strategies in Maus: Architecture Of Trauma

| THE VOID                                                                                                                                                       | THE FREEZE                                                                                                                                                                                          | THE TRAP                                                                                                                                                     | THE ECHO                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mechanism:</b><br>Negative space and white backgrounds.                                                                                                     | <b>Mechanism:</b><br>Splash pages (large, single-panel images) and identical panels repeated in sequence.                                                                                           | <b>Mechanism:</b><br>Rigid, repetitive grids and overlapping panels that clutter the space.                                                                  | <b>Mechanism:</b><br>Recursive motifs—visual symbols like smoke, food, or pills that reappear throughout the narrative.                                                                              |
| <b>Psychological Correlate:</b><br>Emotional numbing; a way to "honor the silence of the dead" by leaving the page empty where words or images cannot suffice. | <b>Psychological Correlate:</b><br>Temporal arrest; mimics the experience of PTSD intrusive memory loops, where the survivor feels as if time has stopped and the event is happening over and over. | <b>Psychological Correlate:</b><br>Carceral logic (the feeling of being imprisoned); a sense of physical and mental constriction and a total loss of agency. | <b>Psychological Correlate:</b><br>Postmemory; the phenomenon where trauma is transmitted across generations, echoing through the lives of those who did not experience the original event directly. |

Figure F: Four Spatial Strategies of Trauma Representation in Maus

### 4.2 Simplified Figuration in Persepolis: Visibility, Resistance, and the Veil

Satrapi's visual strategy in *Persepolis* is not, strictly speaking, anthropomorphic in the way that Spiegelman's is: her characters are human beings, drawn as human beings. However, the choice of a bold, simplified black-and-white graphic style—heavily influenced by Persian miniature painting and by the stark, high-contrast traditions of revolutionary political art—is essentially a similar act of semiotic protest. Against a backdrop of a story about the enforced wearing of the veil and the crushing of individual identities in the Islamic Republic, the very decision to portray women's faces becomes a deeply political act.

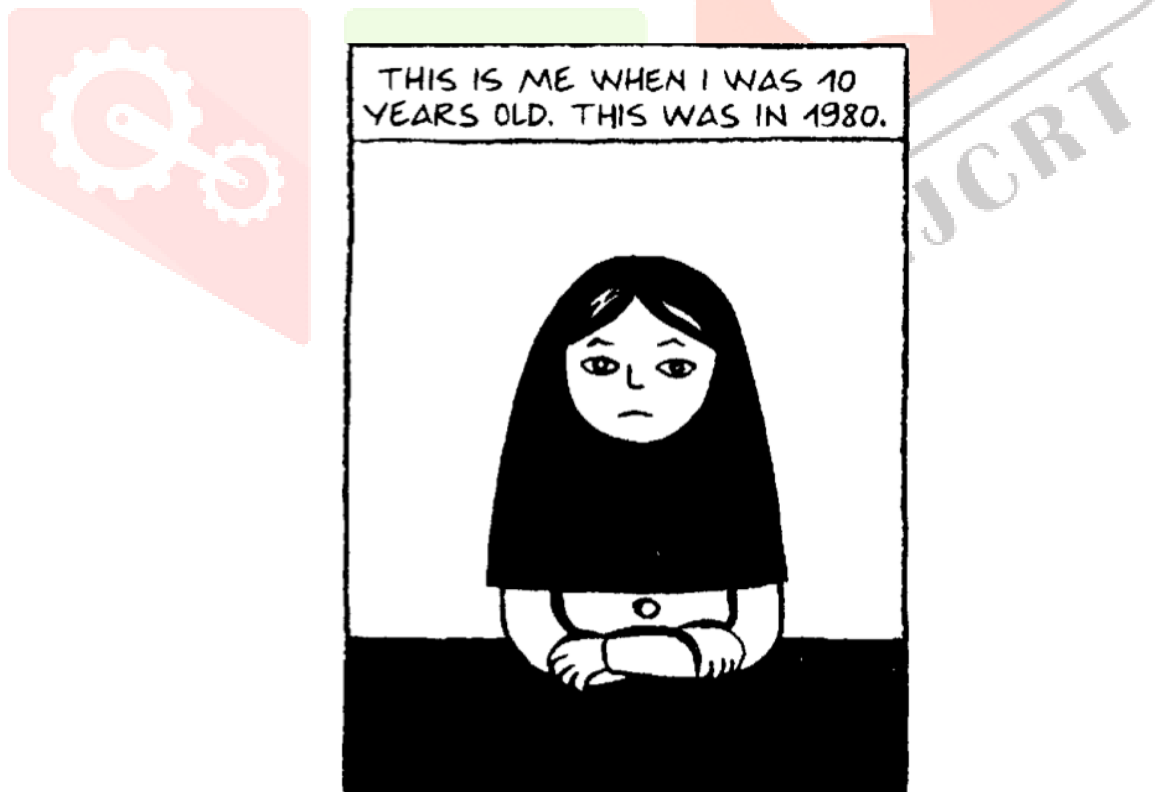


Figure G: *Persepolis*, pp. 3–6. The opening pages of Satrapi's memoir show the young Marji wearing the newly mandated veil following the Islamic Revolution. The bold black-and-white graphic style is established immediately, and the tension between state-imposed uniformity and Satrapi's insistence on rendering individual faces with expressiveness and specificity is introduced as the memoir's governing visual logic. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon Books, 2003.

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Satrapi's characters correspond, in McCloud's language, to very strong icons: they are simplified, with big expressive eyes, few details in the face, and the bodies are represented mostly by the outlines and the gestures. The comic-strip-like style does not at all mean that the work is naive—rather, it is a well-thought-through, intentional decision on the part of Satrapi to reveal that which the Islamic Republic chose to hide: the individuality, the inner state, and the political activist role of Iranian women. The veils, according to the political reasoning of the Islamic Republic, were supposed to make women interchangeable, to obliterate the individual in the name of the collective religious identity. Satrapi's striking, very individual characters—even when they are veiled, by their body language, their facial expressions, and their specific ways of moving in space, they can be recognized—the individuality not only survives but is made visible by the veil.



Figure H: *Persepolis*, pp. 74–76. Panels in which veiled women nonetheless remain visually and narratively distinct through their posture, gesture, facial expression, and spatial behaviour. These pages demonstrate Satrapi's central visual argument: that the Islamic Republic's unifying ideological mechanism failed to erase the individual, and that the act of drawing these faces is itself an act of political resistance. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon Books, 2003. Reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use.

The black-and-white scheme of *Persepolis* has a kind of semiotic significance in itself. The lack of colour is an imposition of a moral and visual clarity that is, in a way, the Manichean political world. Satrapi shows the revolutionary state was trying to split the world into the good and the bad, the Islamic and the Western, the veiled and the shameless, in a Manichean way. However, Satrapi's black and white are not the black and white of the revolutionary state: they are richer, more ambiguous, more capable of containing contradiction. The white of the page is not the white of cleanliness; it is the white of the void, of the stories that have not been told, of the missing people. The black is not the black of evil; it is the black of being seen, of firmness, of the refusal to be wiped out.

One of the most potent ways that state violence is portrayed in *Persepolis* is through the use of the simplified graphic style. In fact, the plainness of Satrapi's figures only serves to heighten the impact of the violence when she is showing executions, street fights, or the cruel whims of the morality police. Since

there is no photographic detail to hide behind, the reader is given no way to evade the structural fact of violence. It is shown without the visual distractions that could have made it beautiful or strange. So, going by the role that Satrapi's graphics play, one could compare it to Spiegelman's use of animals in his story: it gives a distance in representation that, at the same time, is a closeness in ethics.

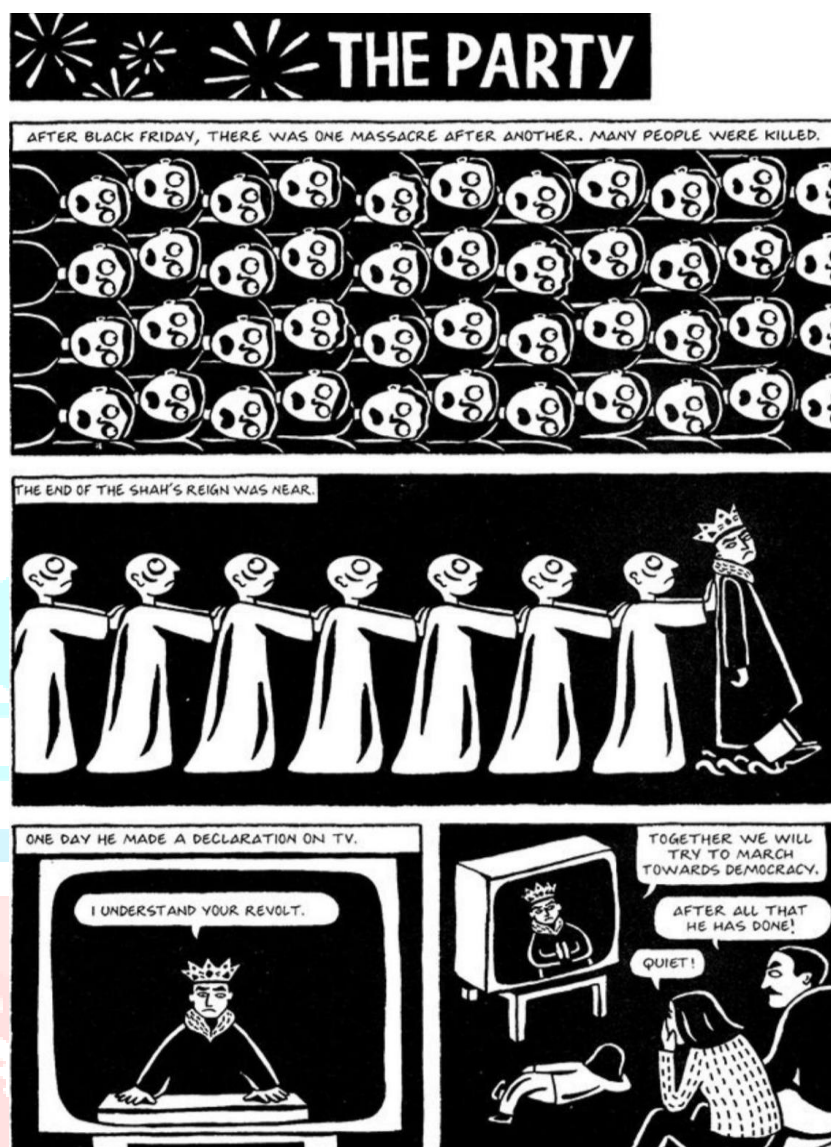


Figure I: *Persepolis*, pp. 38–40. Satrapi's depiction of street demonstrations and state violence is rendered in her characteristically minimal black-and-white style. The absence of photographic detail does not diminish the violence but rather makes its structural reality unavoidable: the reader has no visual complexity to retreat into and is brought into direct ethical confrontation with what is being shown. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon Books, 2003.

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## V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

When placed side by side, *Maus* and *Persepolis* display some major similarities in their semiotic strategies; however, they also exhibit significant differences, which reflect the different historical traumas they depict and the different subject positions they adopt.

The most basic similarity is the use of abstraction as a form of ethical mediation. Both Spiegelman and Satrapi decide against representing their characters in a photorealistic manner, and in both instances, this decision is here considered as a manifestation of the representational double bind of historical trauma: on one side, there is the danger of overpowering the reader with graphic realism, and on the other side, there is the danger of aestheticizing or sensationalizing the suffering. The simplified icon—either an animal face or a human outline with a bold line—makes it possible for the reader to engage with the story without either turning away from it or treating it as a spectacle.

Besides the main similarities, both works also possess a metafictional element: Spiegelman and Satrapi both depict themselves making artistic and representational choices, and in a way, these deliberations become part of the text. Spiegelman's worrying about which animal face to give French Jews is like Satrapi's occasional moments of thinking about how hard it is to depict certain scenes—for example, she does not show the death of her friend Neda by a normal story panel but by an isolated, symbolic image of a bracelet in the rubble, a part standing for the whole which recognizes the impossibility of representing everything. The consciousness-raising about representation in both is, in fact, a manifestation of a moral determination: a denial of the pretence that the power of telling historical trauma is something clear and without problems.



Figure J: *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, p. 13. Satrapi's isolated, symbolic image of Neda Baba-Levy's bracelet in the rubble following a missile strike, chosen instead of a direct depiction of the death itself. This image stands as a metonymic act of representation — the part standing for the whole — and acknowledges that some traumas exceed the capacity of narrative imagery to contain them. From *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon Books, 2004. Reproduced for scholarly analysis under fair use.

The main difference between the two books is how the visual style and the building of ethnic or racial identity are related. In *Maus*, the animal allegory revolves deeply around racial categorization: the assorted species represent different ethnic and national groups, and the allegory is aimed at revealing the violence and irrationality of racial thinking. The mice are mice because the Nazis referred to Jews as vermin; the allegory is a reaction to a racial categorization that was a specific historical event. On the other hand, in *Persepolis*, all the characters are human beings of the same species; the visual differentiation between them is not species-based but is achieved through posture, costume, and the symbolic use of black and white. The politics of *Persepolis* are not mainly about racial categorization but about gender, class, and the interaction between individual identity and a collective religious ideology.

A further divergence concerns the relationship between the narrator and the events narrated. Spiegelman is a second-generation survivor; his trauma is postmemorial, mediated through his father's testimony, and the animal allegory is in part a device for managing the psychological and ethical difficulties of that mediated position. Satrapi, by contrast, is a first-person witness to the events she depicts; her simplified

self-portrait is not a device for managing distance but a device for asserting presence—for insisting that she was there, that she saw, and that the act of drawing is an act of testimony. The formal similarities between the two works thus conceal an important difference in the epistemological position from which each speaks.

Animal allegory in Spiegelman's work and the pared-down human figures of Satrapi are, therefore, not coincidentally two parallel strategies but responses to different, albeit closely related, forms of dehumanization. The Holocaust was a race-based genocide; therefore, representing racial categorization is something that cannot be avoided when one is dealing with it in an honest way. The Iranian Revolution was not a genocide but rather a revolution that enacted a view of religious and gender identity that obliterated individual difference. So the challenge in this case is not so much artfully depicting race but rather in bringing to light how the individual is lost through a uniforming ideological mechanism.



*Figure K: Maus Vol. I, p. 33. A crowd scene of mouse-faced Jewish figures, illustrating how zoomorphic mass identity simultaneously enforces and subverts Nazi racial categorization.*



*Figure L: Persepolis, p. 5. A crowd scene of uniformly veiled women illustrates how the Islamic Republic's ideological mechanism imposed visual and social homogeneity.*

## VI. CONCLUSION

This article has proposed that the non-human metaphor in Maus and the minimalist representation in Persepolis are not merely the authors' aesthetic decisions at a surface level, but rather, they perform semiotic revolts. These are visual methods that challenge, undermine, and reveal the inhuman rationalities of the historical governments that the stories uncover. Each work makes the most of the unique aspects of the graphic format—the potential of a simplified pictograph to create a connection, the power of a comic book page to display various timeframes and different levels of representation at the same time—for achieving results that just words could not bring about.

The comparative reading has uncovered some major points of agreement: (1) both works use abstraction as an ethical mediating device; (2) both are meta-fictionally aware of their own representational choices; and (3) both create what might be called a representational distance that is at the same time an ethical proximity—a way of bringing the readers close to historical traumas without either overwhelming or letting them consume the traumas as spectacle. These points of agreement hint that it could be something inherent in the graphic memoir as a mode of expression that it is uniquely fitted to deal with the representational issues of historical trauma.

The divergences pointed out are just as enlightening. The varied ways the two pieces relate visual style to racial identification not only reveal the unique decisions of the authors but also the distinct historical wounds each author is dealing with and the different "locations" from which each author is speaking. Thus, a comparative study of signs in graphic memoir should focus not only on the formal similarities but also on the particular historical, political, and moral contexts that make those formal choices meaningful. The importance of these discoveries is actually even larger than the narrow area of comics studies. As the graphic memoir has become one of the most recognized forms of witness literature featuring traumatic events from the Rwandan genocide to climate displacement to colonialism's continuing effects, the semiotic strategies first revealed to the world by Spiegelman and Satrapi will serve as both an example and a source of inspiration for new artists and researchers in this field.

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