

If a picture told a thousand words

Science, Computer Science



The concept of merging imagery and text together for the purpose of telling stories has grown to be a reputable industry commonly referred to as comics. What once started as a technique to enhance and entice people to read newspapers, has since grown to captivate all audiences, enhancing the reading experience of novels with the use of visuals (Ramsey, *The Artifice*). Both Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Lila Weaver's *Darkroom* rely on the comic medium to engage the audience in their riveting and heartfelt stories. However, Spiegelman and Weaver depend on contrasting techniques, mainly in regard to the text and images used, to express these stories and their feelings. Thus, there is a different connection made with the reader based on how the story is told through the comic artform.

Both Art Spiegelman and Lila Weaver reflect on historical periods which had a great influence and effect on the world. In the case of *Maus I and II*, the plot follows Spiegelman's father during the holocaust. *Darkroom* by Weaver focuses on the segregation in the South of America, taking the perspective of neither white or black. Both of these stories contain upsetting material, with an abundance of important factual details to recount. However, despite all the disturbing facts the reader is not left feeling overwhelmed or confused. This effect can be attributed to the use of images that allows the information to be expressed in a way so the reader can easily understand. According to Ilya, the author of *How to Draw Comics*, the artform of comics is unique in the sense that an exact tempo is implied. The author places the images in a way that provides a guided pathway for the readers eye while still allowing them to choose their own pace (Ilya 88). This highlights how important the images are when considering how to make the material understandable.

In *Maus I and II*, Art Spiegelman makes effective use of his images, though deliberately making simplistic drawings. By creating the images with less detail, he draws the reader's attention to the words and the story being told. This technique is used so that the reader does not get overwhelmed or distracted by the visuals. Also, in the drawings certain ideas and themes are symbolically portrayed in order to be easily understood. This is an effective tactic because the images act as a guide rather than the sole provider of information. It allows Art to tell the story through text while relying on his drawings to support the plot with important details.

In Contrast, Weaver aims to include hyper real images. She tries to capture the essence of people, places and things, putting a focus on their details. By incorporating more details into the images, she allows the reader to empathize and connect with the story, for the reason that it has a deeper sense of realness. By creating images focused on details, it allows Weaver to rely on the text only as an aid. By having more images than words, the reader does not get overwhelmed by text thus creating a sense of ease while reading.

Images are a very effective tool when relaying a message. In the *Rhetoric of an Image* by Barthes, he explains that in a photographic advertisement there are three messages. These include the linguistic, the literal and the symbolic (Barthes 32-51). The same three messages can be found in comics. The text provides the linguistic message, which means what the author chooses to convey verbally. The literal message can be found in what the author draws,

and through the images the symbolic message can be established. In both Maus and Darkroom the analysis' of these messages varies.

In Maus, the use of more text and less detailed images allows the audience to not get distracted by the images and thus participate more. Although his images may be simplistic, there is a clear symbolic message that can be noticed in his drawings, and that is the use of particular animals to reflect races. There is a connection made between the cat and mouse chase, and the Holocaust. This is never explicitly stated, but Spiegelman chooses to symbolically represent his characters with animals that represent that idea. Weaver allows little space for symbolism, rather she puts her emphasis on the literal message. The use of photography as her medium for images enables more control over what is being expressed, therefore providing Darkroom with a sense of clarity and realness.

Spiegelman and Weaver take opposing approaches to their comics. Although both authors place different emphasis' on the importance of images and their details, their reasoning behind these choices is similar. Both authors wish to engage the audience in their riveting stories of history, but do not want the reader to stop participating. Deborah Geis, author of Considering Maus, stated that by using the method of a comic the goal was to personalize the enormity without reducing it (Geis 46). In Maus, the use of more text and less detailed images allows the audience to not get distracted by the images and thus participate more. In Darkroom, the use of more detailed images and less text allows the reader to not get overwhelmed by

text and thus participate more. Both authors aim for total participation from the reader, although in different ways.

Another contrast between these two authors is their use of words. It has been made clear that in *Maus* and *Darkroom* there is a different emphasis on how much text to use, but they also use the text for different purposes. It is not only important to notice how they use the text, it is also interesting to analyze how and where the words are written. Both Spiegelman and Weaver use the words in their comics to engage the audience in a dialogue about history.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman puts a large emphasis on the text. He relies on the text to address the main story plot. It is interesting to observe how he writes the text. He often writes in the form of speech bubbles, although he also uses narrative. By mixing the dialogue directly into the images, it creates a sense that the reader is a part of the scene. This technique makes the un-relatable content seem more personal. To contribute to the personal effect of his comic, Spiegelman also writes his text by hand as opposed to typing it.

Weaver makes use of the text in a different way. In *Darkroom* there is more emphasis on the narrative rather than dialogue. She places the text surrounding the images rather than within them. This technique allows Weaver to express her opinion of the story and include more historical facts than could be accomplished through dialogue. Although this gives the reader more detail about the situation, it becomes less personal. This is because the audience is outside of the story observing more from a distance.

These two comics are similar in the way that they are both aiming to relay an important moment in history. Although they recount different events and from different times, both comics tell dark stories with an emphasis on race. Spiegelman and Weaver express these stories with similar techniques. They ensure to use important details, allowing the audience to sympathize and connect, but omit details that would prove to be gruesome and disturbing. The pictures also act as an aid for the author to give the reader an understanding of the situation without being horrific.

The re-telling of a moment from the past is an important part of understanding the world around us in the present moment. Both Spiegelman and Weaver include themes in their comics that are applicable to the present. William Schneider, the author of *Living with Stories*, explains how a person can re-tell the events of the past, and illustrates that the version of the story being told may have changed. As he explains, a story is a way to relate to the present, and a person's memory may allow people to recall specific information that can be related to the current events in the world (Schneider 15).

In *Maus*, Spiegelman relies on his father's experience, and the memories he has in order to tell the story of the Holocaust. His father has fragmented memories, and according to Schneider's theory, what was remembered may have been only the details that were needed in order to cope with the present (Schneider 15). This theory can be applied to *Maus* when noticing that Art's father only conveys certain events and details while others are no longer rememberable. The other important aspect of how Spiegelman was

able to tell his father's story was by taking notes, but more importantly by recording his interviews with his father. Although, tape recording for the purposes of interviews may be seen as temporary, in reality they become similar to ancient texts. The perception of the audience changes to fully comprehend the story in the context of the time it has been told (Schneider 9).

In *Darkroom*, Weaver does not rely on interviews, tape recordings or any other forms of recording information. Rather, she relies on her memory, and also chooses to incorporate factual details. The story is told from her point of view, recounting her memories as a young girl in order to portray the situation her family, and the families around her, experienced. Schneider states, if people become open to accepting that the telling of a story may be influenced by the present, then their memories cannot be judged on accuracy or completeness (Schneider 15). It may be the case for *Darkroom* that her memories proved to highlight important issues that the world is currently still dealing with. Nonetheless, her story provides a representation and point of view of the historical event.

The artform of comics aims to create an environment of immersive involvement. As Ilya mentions, there is a requirement for comics to have an active and engaged audience to participate in the telling of the story (Ilya 79). By using this technique the stories being told are easier to understand and become more relatable to the reader. The use of text and images simultaneously creates an experience for the reader of total involvement. Although Art Spiegelman and Lila Weaver put different emphasis' on the text

and images, their goal is the same. They rely on both aspects of the comic artform in order to express their stories of history while also making it relatable to the reader. Although there are important guidelines that make a comic successful, there is room for creative development which allows the author to relate to the audience in varying ways. Despite the contrasting approaches to the comic artform, Maus I and II and Darkroom have employed the comic techniques in order to re-tell the events of the past, making them easy to understand and relatable to the reader.