

Comic Book Historicism

Although I set about in *Maus* to do a history of sorts I'm all too aware that ultimately what I'm creating is a realistic fiction. The experiences my father actually went through, there's what he's able to remember and what he's able to articulate, and what I'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that. *Maus* is so many steps removed from the actual experience, they're so distant from each other that all I can do is hint at, intimate, and try for something that feels real to me.¹

– Art Spiegelman

Adopting the reflexive documentary mode the documentary (I'm calling) *Barefoot Gen: The Natsue Episode*, while remaining relatively faithful by using animation to the original source material – Keiji Nakazawa's comic book series *Barefoot Gen* – interrogates the problematic nature of “translating” the catastrophic experience. When representing the catastrophic the assumption is that it should be contextualized within a “serious narrative form” (e.g., expository or observational documentary film, memoir, history, testimony), or if a particular historical event is “fictionalized” it should be appropriately situated within an appropriate genre (e.g., drama, melodrama, or tragedy). This documentary treatment endeavors to work against these cultural assumptions dictating that a solemn historical event, such as the Holocaust or Hiroshima, necessitates a “noble genre.”² It follows in the wake of contemporary animated documentaries including *Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and the animated sequence entitled “Men in Black,” in *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* (PBS series *America at the Crossroads*, Richard E. Robbins, 2005), which embrace the inherent subjective perspective of the animated form.

Understanding our narrative expectations regarding catastrophic events, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in many respects similar to *Barefoot Gen*, adopts certain rhetorical strategies – the inclusion of photographs, and a “genuine” survivor's testimony – to

¹ Spiegelman cited in Graham Smith, “From Micky to Maus: Recalling the Genocide through Cartoon,” *Oral History Journal* vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 28.

² Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41.

defray criticism that he has “trivialized,” or “deformed” the horrors of the Holocaust by utilizing the comic form. **Unlike *Maus* though the original source that I’m drawing on here, *Barefoot Gen*, never feels compelled to “prove” to its readers that what they are reading is “real” by including photographs or eye-witness testimonial accounts; it doesn’t kowtow to the “reality effect.”**³ Nevertheless Spiegelman’s comic books frustrate our conventional expectations that the Holocaust should be treated within a “noble genre.” His comic books situate the Holocaust as a “cat and mouse game,” where the Germans are depicted as cats, who are always on the prowl to find Jews, who are depicted as mice; other national or ethnic groups are treated in the same manner: Americans are portrayed as dogs (the supposed “natural” enemy of Germans/cats), Poles are pigs, Gypsies are depicted as gypsy moths, and so on. The allegorization of the Holocaust as a “cat and mouse game” is certainly contentious and could potentially be read as a trivialization of “real horror.” In addition, the mere employment of the comic book form itself, by conventional standards, presumably compromises the factual content. Indeed, Spiegelman’s *Maus* challenges our common assumptions regarding the “right” way to represent the catastrophic.

Whether it is the comic book form alone, or the coupling of the form and the characters’ allegorization – “a cat and mouse game” – that spawns contention is of little consequence, because typically both are perceived as antithetical to historical discourse, and dismissed as viable modes for representing the catastrophic.⁴ Spiegelman even expresses reservations himself about the comic book’s capacity to represent the Holocaust. In one episode Spiegelman illustrates himself, and his father together in his car. “I feel so inadequate,” Spiegelman thinks to himself, “trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams.” Recognizing the immanent criticism Spiegelman continues, “and trying to do it as a *comic strip!* I guess I bit off more than I can chew.” He finally laments, “Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing.”⁵ Elsewhere,

³ Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141 - 148.

⁴ As a short anecdote to the supposed inability of comic books to deal with “serious” issues, while I was working on my Ph.D. I was reading *Maus* in my school office. One of the faculty members of the department passing by my office, and seeing me reading *Maus*, sarcastically remarked, “I see you’re hard at work.” Of course, the suggestion was that in fact I wasn’t “hard at work,” that comic books couldn’t possibly be considered “serious,” or “hard work.”

⁵ Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began Volume II*, 16.

Spiegelman sits with his surrogate father, his therapist, and comments, “My book? Hah! What book?? Some part of me doesn’t want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can’t visualize it clearly, and I can’t BEGIN to imagine what it felt like.”⁶

Although Spiegelman is self-effacing when confronting his father’s catastrophic experience, the *Maus* comic books help to address, or to raise some of the most critical questions regarding representations of the catastrophic. Perhaps not entirely through design, Spiegelman, and most importantly because his medium is the comic book, confronts the underlying (mis)conceptions surrounding representations of the catastrophic, and the prejudice against narrative forms and genres that don’t conform to the “reality effect.” The comic book narrative form itself necessitates interpretation (on the part of the illustrator), manipulation, deformation, etc. and translation from the “historical world” – as Bill Nichols refers to it in his *Representing Reality* – into one of imagination. Although utterly erroneous, because of the assumed “reality effect” of a medium such as a film, it is presumed to more closely approximate the “real horrors” of the Holocaust. As Hayden White notes, Spiegelman “assimilates the events of the Holocaust to the conventions of comic book representation, and in this absurd mixture of a ‘low’ genre with events of the most momentous significance, *Maus* manages to raise all of the crucial issues regarding the ‘limits of representation’ in general.”⁷ Spiegelman “illustrates” the problems of representation, and while on the one hand, demonstrating the potential impact of “non-realistic” narrative forms and genres when representing the catastrophic, at the same time, his work raises serious questions about the supposed “fidelity” of other narrative forms and genres (e.g., documentary film). As for the latter, when Spiegelman struggles with “translating” the catastrophic experience into comic book form, one comes to realize that film – despite its supposed “reality effect” – must in many ways grapple with exactly the same problems; how does one “transform” horror, “transform” events that resist representation, into cinematic images?

Despite my reservations regarding Spiegelman’s possible regression into conservative narrative tropes, his work, because of its form and narrative content, is exemplary historical writing. Spiegelman constantly questions the capacity of the comic

⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷ White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 42.

book form to convey historical and personal knowledge. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, his comic books are self-reflexive. Unlike standard historical discourse, which conceals its construction, rendering the historian an invisible, but “objective” purveyor of “found” facts; Spiegelman, in the narrative itself (both in terms of form and content), questions modes of representation and questions his role as mediator, translator, architect of scenes that must be imagined. “Much of Holocaust narrative,” Daniel R. Schwarz observes, “is quite conservative and traditional. Authors reflexively return to expected narrative forms as if they were necessary strategies for the solemnity and high seriousness required by the subject matter.”⁸ As an exemplary piece of historical discourse, Spiegelman’s *Maus* helps us to think otherwise, to imagine other creative ways in which to engage the catastrophic experience.

In dramatic contrast with the Western tradition which all but precludes the possibility of “serious” treatments of solemn topics in the comic book form, no topic is too serious, too esoteric, too catastrophic, or too solemn for Japanese manga (comic books) or anime (animated films). Keiji Nakazawa’s manga series, *Barefoot Gen*, is largely based on his personal experience. Nakazawa was six years old when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on his city: Hiroshima. He was walking to school, only about a kilometer away from the epicenter, but through some stroke of luck he happened to be standing in front of a concrete wall, which shielded him from the immediate effects of the blast; had he been standing anywhere else, he would surely have been incinerated. His manga illustrates the catastrophic experience; he constructs a narrative from his own experience, as well as others, weaving together details of the experience of living in Hiroshima before the dropping of the atomic bomb, its immediate effect, and its subsequent aftermath.

Originally part of a serialized weekly publication, the comics have subsequently been published in a multi-volume series, all of which have now been translated into English (and other languages), and in 1983 adapted as an animated film.⁹ There are some similarities between *Maus* and *Barefoot Gen*, however, the most notable difference is that

⁸ Schwarz, 302.

⁹ *Barefoot Gen* has been incorporated into the Japanese middle-school curriculum. Interestingly my local video store will only rent the video to people 17 years or older. Every Japanese child knows Gen, and his harrowing tale of survival.

Nakazawa is largely (but not exclusively) drawing on firsthand knowledge of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima; Spiegelman, on the other hand, had to rely on his father's testimony and his own historical research.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was at least partially influenced by *Barefoot Gen*. In the introduction to the Last Gasp publication of *Barefoot Gen: The Day After*,¹⁰ Spiegelman discusses what affect Nakazawa's comic book had on him and how it influenced *Maus*:

Gen haunts me. The first time I read it was in the late 1970s, shortly after I'd begun working on *Maus*, my own extended comic-book chronicle of the twentieth century's other central cataclysm. I had the flu at the time and read it while high on fever. *Gen* burned its way into my heated brain with all the intensity of a fever-dream. I've found myself remembering images and events from the *Gen* books with a clarity that made them seem like memories from my own life, rather than Nakazawa's.¹¹

Not only is this a testament to the power of Nakazawa's own narrative, but to the potential power of the comic book form, where readers might approach the verisimilitude of an event transfiguring what they *read* for a *memory* of an event.

Spiegelman believes that, "Comics are a highly charged medium, delivering densely concentrated information in relatively few words and simplified coded-images."¹² No doubt the abundance of comic books, the diversity of genres, and the degrees of complexity in Japan seem to support Spiegelman's case; at least in Japan. The power of comic books is not determined in the content that they present *per se*, but in their form, which for Spiegelman "is a model of how the brain formulates thoughts and remembers." According to him, "We think in cartoons."¹³ **And drawing directly from this idea, this treatment aims to reflexively illustrate that it is *not* a transparent window onto reality, but rather is a product of the filmmaker's construction, which is mediated through Nakazawa's *memory*, and *assimilation* of stories he heard.**

Just as with *Maus*, Nakazawa was confronted with attempting to render a catastrophic event unparalleled in human history. The magnitude of the event seems to

¹⁰ There are two publishers of *The Day After* volume, New Society Publishers and Last Gasp. The latter publisher has published the complete series.

¹¹ Spiegelman, "Barefoot Gen: Comics After the Bomb," introduction to Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: The Day After Volume II* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2005), i.

¹² Spiegelman, "Barefoot Gen," i.

¹³ *Ibid.*

defy explanation, to defy reason and imagination. For Susan Napier – and she is not alone in this – she believes that “manga and anime ... can help to ‘convey the unconveyable’ of the bomb’s horror.”¹⁴ We might say as much because manga and anime are at once, realistic and come nowhere close to the reality of the horror. “Scenes that even with contemporary special effects and contemporary values would be difficult to present and watch in live-action film become in the non-realistic space of animation, enduring evocations of a genuine hell on earth.”¹⁵ In addition, because these are animated characters, this permits “for easier identification on the part of the viewer. On the other hand, the fact that these are not ‘real’ humans or ‘real’ destruction being depicted provides a kind of psychological buffer zone to keep the viewer from being too affected by the traumatic events depicted.”¹⁶ In addition, a comic book or animated film, such as *Barefoot Gen*, can draw on earlier visual culture; in the aftermath of the atomic blast, Nakazawa’s illustrations, while at once drawing upon the reality of what he witnessed, also hint to Buddhist depictions of hell.

Nakazawa, through his own admission, was motivated to write the comic book series by the ethics of “never again.” His primary character, Gen, embodies this. The Japanese word “gen” actually means “root,” or “source,” and Nakazawa subsequently remarks:

I named my main character Gen in the hope that he would become a root or source of strength for a new generation of mankind - one that can tread the charred soil of Hiroshima barefoot, feel the earth beneath its feet, and have the strength to say “no” to nuclear weapons.... I myself would like to live with Gen’s strength - that is my ideal, and I will continue pursuing it through my work.¹⁷

The characters, and specifically Gen, are not then real people *per se* (such as we find in Spiegelman’s *Maus*); the episodes and the themes, however, are “real.” Gen is an idealization, an embodiment of everything humane that arose from the ashes of Hiroshima; he is a composite of humane actions performed by Hiroshima survivors. Gen’s character also serves a narrative function: he drives the narrative trajectory; the

¹⁴ Susan Napier, *Anime: from Akira to Princess Monokoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁷ Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen* (Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1988), viii.

narrative tracks his journey through time and space. We witness Gen's transformation from a young boy into a man. It is also through Gen's eyes that we bear witness to the catastrophic effects of atomic weapons. As with *Maus*, Nakazawa's work confronts "the intersection between personal history and world history."¹⁸

Although not as explicit as Spiegelman's *Maus*, extra-diegetic breaks in *Barefoot Gen* – where Nakazawa subtly reflects about the fate of his characters – establish an exterior space, the space in which the narrative is constructed. **These extra-diegetic moments in the original source material create an opening for the reflexive documentary mode, of which I fully expect to exploit.** While Spiegelman clearly depicts himself in the process of creating *Maus* – for example we see Spiegelman at his drawing table listening to his father's audio-taped testimony¹⁹ – Nakazawa, in something akin to a voice-over in film, breaks with the narrative to address the reader directly. Although only inferred, the narrative break suggests an exterior space beyond Gen's story and thus also implies Nakazawa's narrative construction. **In addition, and this is also present in *Maus*, Nakazawa's comments are subjective, they offer an interpretation of the facts, rather than disguise (such as traditional historical narratives or documentaries do) the inherent necessity to imagine, create, and interpret information; Nakazawa is not the invisible author, but is present in the narrative as an embodiment of Gen, and in the process of interpreting the catastrophic episodes. The current film treatment has no intention of disguising authorship either.**

In the disturbing and problematic Natsue-episode in *Barefoot Gen*, Nakazawa has adopted a particular theme that emerges as something of a cliché in post-atomic Japanese narratives; often young and beautiful at least before the blast, the female victim becomes the "perfect victim." Kenzaburo Oë, for example, in his volume, *Hiroshima Notes*, repeatedly returns to the theme of keloid-scarred girls, almost as if girls or young women were the only ones afflicted with keloid scars. "They are people who take the misery inflicted upon them by the atomic bomb," Oë proclaims, "and convert it from a passive into an active force; they use their shame and humiliation as weapons in the movement against nuclear arms."²⁰ Nevertheless he laments that, "Most of these girls have become

¹⁸ Spiegelman, "Barefoot Gen," i.

¹⁹ See for example Spiegelman's meta-narrative in *Maus Volume II*, pages 41 and 47.

²⁰ Oë, *Hiroshima Notes*, 106.

silent.”²¹ While Oë attempts to support the efforts of those outspoken women, figuring them as heroines, most young women, in Oë’s assessment, were not brave enough to rebuff their social rejection, and he, subsequently, calls these young women “escapists.”²²

Like Nakazawa’s character Natsue, Oë presumes that these afflicted women divide “all people on earth into two groups; the sense of shame is the line separating persons with keloid scars from all others without them.”²³ Those women who are afflicted with keloid scars, according to Oë, “feel ashamed of themselves before those who have none.”²⁴ It is this supposed *line of separation* that might better be characterized as abjection. Hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors), and most especially those marked with keloid scars (as Natsue inevitably will be), are figured as the living-dead, polluted not so much with radiation as with death. The young female victim figures as the “perfect victim” on at least two levels: first, because a girl is typically not associated with the mechanism of war, she can be figured as an innocent bystander; she is collateral damage. And, by focusing the post-atomic narrative on the young female victim, Japan too, as a whole, might be absolved of its colonial aggression by identifying with the “innocent victim.”

The innocent child motif is not just limited to *Barefoot Gen* (the manga and the anime), but appears in various stories from, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, to animated films, such as *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no haka*), and perhaps even *Akira*. Isao Takahata’s 1988 animated feature film, *Grave of the Fireflies*, is quite similar to *Barefoot Gen* in its focus on adolescent and pre-adolescent characters. As with both of these narratives, the primary characters, although only children, are left to fend for themselves during the war. These two narratives, Napier observes, “share in the collectivity of the Japanese memory as well as individual autobiographical accounts of personal suffering. In this regard, they attempt to ‘speak for history’ in a personal voice that, through the power of vivid images of suffering, destruction, and renewal, becomes a collective voice of the Japanese people.”²⁵ As Napier indicates, both of these narratives are essentially family dramas, and I would add that it is precisely for this reason that both

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 105.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 161-162.

Barefoot Gen and *Grave of the Fireflies* are such highly emotive narratives. Moreover, because the narrative is seen through the eyes of children, the narratives take on a sense of innocence, and senselessness.

This motif, or rhetorical device, of assuming the perspective of a child, accentuates the emotional affect of a narrative. The destruction of the familial unit arranges a narrative that is designed to “pull on the heartstrings,” so to speak, and at the same time, give the narrative a “universal” appeal, that is to say that, everyone has a mother, father, etc., and thus can identify, at least on these terms. In *Barefoot Gen*, for example, Gen has watched his father, sister and brother burn to death. In *Grave of the Fireflies* the two child-protagonists’ mother dies, making them orphans. While we in the States might not be able to comprehend the catastrophic destruction, or the struggle to survive in an environment of scarcity – both *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies* focus on the scarcity of food – we can nevertheless “comprehend” the pain and trauma of familial loss. **The current treatment aims to critically assess the “innocent child” motif.**