

## **We All Bleed History: Alternative Historical Viewpoints Expressed in *Maus*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Schindler's List***

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**Abstract:** We were told that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. As it happens, the same stands true for history. A historical event changes dramatically, depending on who is narrating the story. In Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, we hear Vladek Spiegelman's retelling of the Holocaust. As a survivor of both the war and the Auschwitz concentration camps, Vladek's story is filled with the grim remembrances of a man who had to do whatever it took to survive. Erich Maria Remarque shows us the battles of World War I, but from the point of view of a German soldier in *All's Quiet on the Western Front*. In popular culture, Germany is often reproduced as the antagonist in the great wars. However, Remarque shows us that for a soldier nothing exists on the battlefield other than death, violence, and a few glimmers of friendship. *Schindler's List* is yet another intriguing version of the Holocaust where Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi Party, does all that he can to save the Jewish workers in his factory. This is not just the viewpoint of someone close to the infamous party, but also glimpses of kindness and compassion in one of the darkest times in human history. My paper will attempt to understand the importance of these alternative glimpses into history and try to problematize the concepts of "truth" and "history."

**Keywords:** Alternative History, *Maus*, *Schindler's List*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, war, Holocaust, history, comic book.

History was, at one point, believed to be set in stone. Careful analysis of the artifacts from historic periods would present us with an objective image of the times gone by. However, as we approach recent history, the usefulness of such methods comes under scrutiny. The reasons for this are the personal accounts. Historical events, such as the Holocaust, have been witnessed by several individuals who have lived to tell the tale. Such retellings have come with a perspective quite different from the one which is usually found in critical and / or authoritative texts. It is not

being posited that a personal account is in any way superior to an unbiased academic one. However, both narratives hold equal importance, as they report history from different perspectives. According to Jan R. Veenstra, who elaborates Stephen Greenblatt's take on New Historicism, literary texts are not autonomous entities, as they shape, and are in turn shaped by sociohistorical events. Thus, to a certain extent, all texts can be considered personal. The aim of this paper will be to approach history from the viewpoint of personal narratives, as given in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Schindler's List*, and review their importance in the creation of history and truth.

Our first text, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, is set primarily during the Second World War which was a turbulent time, to say the least. It was filled with many horrific and tragic events. Amongst them, the one that surpasses them all in its notoriety is the Holocaust. Hitler's attempt to purge Germany of all those whom he deemed unworthy has left a scar on the world that has yet to heal fully. Such a traumatic experience is hard to imagine, much less put into words. Kate Douglas, in her book *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* talks about the challenges of helping children with trauma come to terms with their condition:

Gilmore discusses the paradox that trauma is largely considered “unspeakable” or “unrepresentable”—that language is inadequate to articulate trauma—yet, at the same time, writing and speaking are authorized as the primary modes for healing trauma. (Douglas 107)

There is a need for a medium that allows expression of such emotions. Comic books have come to be such a medium, due to their two unique properties. Firstly, with their amalgamation of pictures and text, comic books bypass the restrictions that words have when it comes to expressing traumatic events. As such, comic books allow a more personal rendition of tragic events. Secondly, as Dr. Pramod K. Nayar puts it, comic books provide "hypervisibility" to traumatic topics:

By “hypervisible” I mean an “augmented visibility,” beyond that of CNN or BBC newscast, official histories, or documentations. I see hypervisibility as a feature in the democratization of historical trauma in its availability, accessibility and format. The graphic narrative format, I suggest, makes historical trauma available in a common

format--a format we recognize easily from the comics strips in the daily newspaper.  
(Nayar 59)

Thus, a comic book not only incorporates a viewpoint beyond that of "official histories," but does so in a manner which feels familiar to the reader. These two properties of the comic book facilitate the proper expression of traumatic memories from one individual to another.

Of course, when we speak of comic books and traumatic experiences, the one name that cannot be missed is Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Whenever one talks about Holocaust literature, one expects to read a heart-wrenching and terrifying narrative, especially if it consists of first-person accounts. Spiegelman's *Maus*, however, begins by easing the reader into the story. The book starts with a young Art Spiegelman getting hurt while playing with his friends. A while later, when he tells his father about the incident, his father exclaims:

Friends? Your friends?... If you lock them in a room with no food for a week... then you could see what it is friends. (Spiegelman 5)

This conversation establishes the tone of the narrative as told by a man traumatized by his experiences, especially those in Auschwitz. But it does not start with the events of Auschwitz itself. As a matter of fact, there is no mention of the Nazis or Auschwitz in the first chapter. The narrative focuses solely on establishing a connection between the past and the present, as well as between the story and the reader. The reader is not immediately burdened with facts and figures; instead the reader is given the opportunity to witness the turn of events in history, as they took place. Vladek Spiegelman's narration further delineates the narrative from traditional historical writings by incorporating his unique point of view regarding the Holocaust, Auschwitz, and life in general.

The story of Vladek Spiegelman is, at once, the story of every Jew in the Concentration Camps and of no one but himself. The purpose of the first chapter of *Maus* is to establish Vladek as a person, not just another name in the annals of history. Vladek himself tells his son not to put the incidents of his past in the book as "It has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust" (Spiegelman 23). Art Spiegelman counters his father's point by saying that the inclusion of such moments made "everything more real--more human." He also points out that the main objective of his book is to "tell your [Vladek's] story, the way it really happened." Reality here is taken as

Vladek's point of view. This shift of importance from the “official” iteration of history to a personal one not only underlines the desire for a re-evaluation of history, but also the need Art Spiegelman feels to learn more about the tragic past bequeathed to him by his parents.

Vladek himself, of course, is not the most reliable of narrators. An old man at the time of *Maus's* inception, Vladek at many instances side-tracks into other memories, especially those of his late wife Anja. For instance, talking about his first memory of Auschwitz, Vladek begins a spirited discourse on how he and Anja were always together, albeit on a spiritual level:

Vladek: No! The war put us apart. But always, before and after, we were together. Not so like Mala, what grabs out my money-

Art: Auschwitz, Pop, Tell me about Auschwitz. (Spiegelman 25)

His discourses regarding his experiences are coloured by his prejudices and personality. One such moment comes to light when Francoise, Art’s wife, picks up an African-American hitchhiker while driving home with Art and Vladek. Vladek becomes furious at having a “Shvartser” in the car, saying that their belongings could have been stolen at any time. Such racism further highlights the fact the Vladek is not perfect and, by extension, neither is his version of the holocaust. However, his memories are still true and they imbue history with a vitality that factual textbooks do not possess.

Vladek had survived throughout the war and within the concentration camp by his wit and whatever goods he had at his disposal. Speaking about his time at the Jewish ghetto, waiting to be taken to Auschwitz, Vladek tells his son how he traded valuables with his cousin Haskel Spiegelman in an attempt to escape. Art and Vladek's conversation at this point is enlightening as it relates to the deterioration of relationships under the strain of a great crisis:

Art: Wouldn't they have helped you even if you couldn't pay? I mean, you were from the same family...

Vladek: Hah! You don't understand.., at that time it wasn't anymore families. It was everybody to take care for himself! (Spiegelman 114)

Vladek's experiences had quickly made him a cynic, even when it came to his own family. The only person he did not judge by these standards was Anja. Vladek's story, therefore, at many

many times sounds business-like. Even within Auschwitz, in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale II*, he tries to curry favour in order to survive and help Anja. One such attempt (although on behalf of a relative) even enrages his Polish supervisor who yells, "You Jew! You've only been here a few days and you're ready to do business?!" (Spiegelman 33). At many points, Vladek's accounts do not tally with the popular notion of Jews in concentration camps, which is that of constant horrors and suffering. Although Vladek himself experienced numerous hellish moments, they were sprinkled with times of hope and relief. Vladek narrates such an instance when, in Auschwitz, he was able to earn considerable amounts of food by fixing the shoes of the SS soldiers.

While we have discussed the Holocaust from Vladek's perspective, the narrative of *Maus* contains the viewpoint of Art Spiegelman as well. Whenever the narration of the story comes back to the present, we are presented with Art Spiegelman's take on the Holocaust as well as his father. James E. Young, in his essay "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History" reminds us that the autobiographical representation of history does not start with the narration of Vladek but with Art Spiegelman's childhood:

*Maus: A Survivor's Tale* also opens in Rego Park, Queens, circa 1958, with the young Artie's relationship to his father. Indeed, every detail of his childhood life is already fraught with his father's memory, already shaped by his father's experiences. (Young 678)

Art, in an attempt to faithfully reproduce his father's memories of the Holocaust, makes certain choices while creating *Maus* that give the text its distinctive appeal. Hye Su Park in the essay "Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*: A Bibliographic Essay," looks at Art's usage of his private moments with his father as a violation saying, "Artie violates his promise to keep Vladek's testimony personal by turning Vladek's private memory into a public text" (Park 144). Art Spiegelman also shows concern regarding the honest and unflattering manner in which he has depicted his father. He confides, in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I*, to his father's second wife, Mala that he was afraid his portrayal of his father would become akin to a "racist caricature of the miserly old Jew" (Spiegelman 131). Mala also tells Art that she, as well as all of her friends, went to the camps but none turned out like Vladek. Art Spiegelman's father is perhaps not the best example of the survivors of the concentration camps. However, the fact remains that he is a survivor and his recollections as authentic as that of any historian. Such is the nature of personal

narrative that it puts before us a different variation of history, and not always one which is complementary to the popular version. My second text, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, also went against the established notions of history and nationalism at its time of publication. For its stance, the novel was challenged, and banned at many places, but the truth of its narrative triumphed in the end.

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is considered to be a seminal anti-war text. Placed during the First World War, the novel focuses on German soldiers on the "western front," which was opened by the German army after their invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium. The events of the novel take place mostly on the battlefield and the trenches, with a few scenes of the protagonist's, Paul Bäumer's, hometown. The brutality and terror of war is given a fresh perspective when looked at from a soldier's eyes. Bäumer's himself says that the war reduces people to their basest instincts, doing whatever they can to survive, which is akin to Vladek Spiegelman's take on the Holocaust:

We have turned into dangerous animals. We are not fighting, we are defending ourselves from annihilation. We are not hurling our grenades against humans... the hands and the helmets that are after us belong to Death himself... (Remarque 81)

Similar to *Maus*, the depiction of war in *All Quiet on the Western Front* is quite different from the widespread narrative. Since the novel is narrated by a soldier from Germany, a country popularly considered the antagonist in both the First and the Second World War; it looks at history in a divergent manner. Joseph A. Tighe, in his essay "*All Quiet on the Western Front: A Phenomenological Investigation of War*," says that it is possible for a war to have a "universal account." Tighe calls for a phenomenological study of the novel, as it is more of a felt experience than an objective account of the First World War. An individualistic recording of history, for Tighe, is more accessible and accommodating. He refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty saying:

Our experience *of* experience is ambiguous, at once ours and anyone else's. Meaning, then, is meaning-for-us and meaning-for-others. Merleau-Ponty does not see complete meaning as inaccessible, but not because meaning is non-universal; rather, Merleau-Ponty sees meaning as inaccessible due to its temporal nature--any immanent meaning is at once a meaning which may become more determinate at a later time. (Tighe 52)

Tighe looked upon meaning as ever-changing. This is in close conjunction with the reception of Remarque's work. The novel, shortly after its release, was criticized by many groups, foremost of which was the German National Socialist Party, as being an inaccurate and overly harsh description of Germany's war efforts. However, in due time, the novel was hailed for its depiction of the plight of soldiers and the stark representation of the horrors of war. It can now be stated that the underlying truth within *All Quiet on the Western Front* has been fully realized.

Remarque also questions the nature of the nation and its politics. In the novel Kropp, one of Bäumer's fellow soldiers, is of the mind that a war should be between the politician's themselves:

He [Kropp] reckons that all declarations of war ought to be made into a kind of festival... like they have at bullfights. Then the ministers and generals of the two countries would have to come into the ring... Whoever is left on his feet, his country is declared the winner. (Remarque 29)

Kropp finds this to be a fairer solution, as he believes that "the wrong people are fighting each other" (Remarque 29). Kropp's words reveal an exasperation that soldiers had with the protracted war and the sense of disillusionment that was building up within them. In conjunction with this idea, it needs to be noted that most of the characters in *All Quiet on the Western Front* did not join the army on their own volition, but were coerced into doing so. Bäumer talks about his teacher Kantorek who had pressured the young boys into joining the war, saying, "I can still see him, his eyes shining at us through his spectacles and his voice trembling with emotion as he asked, 'You'll all go, won't you lads?'" (Remarque 8). However, Bäumer doesn't put the entire blame on Kantorek as he is sure that "there were thousands of Kantoreks, all of them convinced that they were acting for the best"(Remarque 9). "The best," of course, is for the nation as a whole. In his essay "Nation in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers*," Brent M. Smith-Casanueva posits that war is required to forge the narrative of the nation. In his opinion, "War plays an essential role in the construction of national identity as nationalism is linked to warfare" (Smith-Casanueva 3). Thus, what is considered to be for "the best" of a nation is also taken to be in the best interest for the people of the said nation. This line of thought can not only be used to justify war and other forms of violence, by considering it as beneficial for a country, but also denies individual opinions. It is taken for granted that all

citizens have identical ideas of nationalism and how it can be achieved. *All Quiet on the Western Front* shatters this illusion through the narrative of its characters and their personal notions of war, nationalism and patriotism.

*All Quiet on the Western Front*, as stated earlier, is an anti-war novel and as such, does not share the aforementioned views about war. The novel endeavors to explain how war is a wastage of human life and potential. Peter Leer, Bäumer's classmate and later brother-in-arms, was an intelligent and talented young man who always carried his textbooks with him, hoping to continue his studies after the war. Upon his death after getting hit by a shell fragment, Bäumer began to contemplate how all of Leer's achievements and merits had been for naught. Bäumer asks himself, "What use is it to him now that he was such a good mathematician in school?" (Remarque 200). Questioning the prevalent rhetoric of nation and nationalism, in Smith-Casanueva's opinion, is integral in creating a different and, in Tighe's words, a more accessible form of history. Says Smith-Casanueva, "I argue that *All Quiet...* destabilize[s] this equilibrium by resisting narration of nation through subverting dominant war narratives and structures of national mythology" (Smith-Casanueva 3). The equilibrium Smith-Casanueva mentions is the dominant ideology of a nation and its activities. Remarque, through his novel, portrayed war as a venture filled to the brim with remorse and suffering in order to counter its glorification.

Our third text, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, is not an anti-war film in the way in which *All Quiet on the Western Front* is an anti-war text. It does not initially condemn war and we are never shown scenes from the Second World War in the movie. On the contrary, the protagonist Oskar Schindler, towards the beginning of the film, considers war to be the catalyst for the success of his business venture. We are, however, presented with the atrocities committed upon the Jews by Germany's Nazi Party throughout the duration of the war. The movie works on two levels. Firstly, it portrays the brutality that took place under the Nazi regime, without any attempt to shield the viewers from the acts of violence. Secondly, it established the fact that hope and mercy can come from the unlikeliest of places. The movie is based on the life of Oskar Schindler, a Nazi party member who comes to Krakow in order to make a profit by running an enamelware factory and hiring Jews because they were paid less. Soon Schindler begins to care deeply for the people working for him and goes to great lengths, spending a fortune and repeatedly risking arrests, in order to keep them alive and well. Due to his efforts, more than a



thousand Jews from Poland escaped the terrors of Auschwitz. The movie was unanimously well received. However, concerns were raised as to the way in which history could be influenced with the help of popular culture.

*Schindler's List* is a historical fiction film, which means that it narrates a historical occurrence in a creative manner. What differentiates Spielberg's magnum opus from a documentary film is its artistic narration and character building. Christoph Classen and Kirsten Wächter, in their essay titled "Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* among History, Memory, and Popular Culture," state that the concern critics had with *Schindler's List's* popular reception had much to do with the attempts to deny the occurrence of the Holocaust. According to Classen and Wächter, after the Second World War ended, Germans and other post-war societies "showed little empathy toward this group of victims [Jews]" ( Classen & Wächter 82). Most of them did not wish to accept the horrific tales regarding Auschwitz. In order to establish the reality of the Holocaust, it was essential that narratives based primarily on facts were widely circulated. Thus, facts became indispensable when it came to the depiction of the Holocaust. Any connection with fiction could potentially place the authenticity of the film's portrayal of history in jeopardy. Interestingly, it was fiction itself that helped *Schindler's List* become the iconic Holocaust film that it is today.

As we had discussed earlier, a personal account of history (meaning-for-us) can become everyone's (meaning-for-others) account of history. The problem with earlier cinematic accounts of the Holocaust was that they had become too intellectual and failed to reach the masses. Barbie Zelizer says in the essay "Every Once in a While: *Schindler's List* and the Shaping of History," that Spielberg's film had achieved a "moment of rupture" that critical documentaries could not attain. She explains:

Distributed mostly in art cinemas and consumed mostly by the intellectual elite, films such as Lucino Visconti's... *The Damned* (1969), Liliana Cavani's... *The Night Porter* (1974)... and Hans Jurgen Syberberg's Wagnerian, *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1978) have failed to reach the masses. Their effect on global historical consciousness has therefore been limited. In contrast, *Schindler's List* has penetrated historical consciousness on a global scale and has transformed the image of the Holocaust as perceived by millions of people all over the world. (Zelizer 2)

There are instances in *Schindler's List* that are theatrical, such as Amon Goth attempting to shoot a Jewish worker with two separate guns, both of which inexplicably fail to fire. However, such moments make the narrative more engaging and personal. As Art Spiegelman would say, it makes the story "human."

*Schindler's List* does change the image of the Holocaust for its audience. It no longer appears to be a tragedy that took place long ago and far away. Spielberg succeeded in bringing the Holocaust to the people without compromising on any of its savageries. But, as stated earlier, the moment of epiphany takes place when we see that hope and good can flourish within the presence of great evil. The film shows a Jewish wedding taking place in a concentration camp, the happiness of the workers within the walls of Schindler's factory, and their joy when Schindler asks them to stop working and observe the Sabbath. Schindler also creates a new discourse of power when he tells Goth that power lies not in punishing people, but in forgiving them. Goth himself feels a forbidden love for his Jewish maid Helen Hirsch. When Schindler comes to rescue Hirsch, offering to pay Goth handsomely for her, he refuses saying, "She [Helen]'s not going to Auschwitz. I'd never do that to her. No, I want her to come back to Vienna with me. I want her to come to work for me there. I want to grow old with her" (2:25:54-2:26:04). Thus, even within the brutal and inhuman character of Goth, there was a spark of kindness. In short, *Schindler's List* shows us the truth behind a horrific tragedy and, at the same time, gives us hope for the future.

From our readings, it can be said that history is many-faceted and multi-dimensional. The truth about history changes with a shift in perspective, narrator or medium. However, an absence of a "universal history," as Tighe puts it, gives us the opportunity to explore alternate versions in order to further enrich our understanding of history. Our analysis of *Maus*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Schindler's List* has provided us with enough evidence to suggest that no rendition of a historic event, especially the chaotic periods of war, can be considered exhaustive. We also come to the realization that no period in history is governed by one emotion. In the most horrific of instances, we have seen a sliver of hope. It does not undermine the tragedies that have occurred, but stands as a testament to the strength of the indomitable human spirit. With the passage of time history will be continuously reevaluated, with each new interpretation adding to

its overall meaning. By accepting such new renditions, we will be creating a space for further dialogue and discussion.

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