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"I LOOKED JUST LIKE RUDOLPH VALENTINO": IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION IN MAUS

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The concept of identity in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is tied inextricably to questions of appearance in this comics narrative; the visual form of comics itself, however, allows appearance to be seen as both mirror and metaphor. The frontispiece to *Maus I*'s first chapter, "The Sheik," offers a portrait of Vladek Spiegelman, Art's father, leaving his former girlfriend, Lucia Greenberg (Spiegelman 1986: 9). The grandiose title is figuratively and literally eclipsed by this less than flattering image of Vladek. A few pages into the chapter, Vladek boasts, "People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino" (13). While the juxtaposition of the "sheik" in the poster with Vladek's hunched figure draws a humorous comparison between Vladek's supposed past glories and his present state, the poster also hearkens back, reflexively and negatively, to the chapter's frontispiece, inviting readers to examine how characters assume—or at least strive to create—an identity for themselves.

Identity in *Maus* is tied inextricably to appearance and representation—most notably in its animal metaphors: cats, pigs, dogs, and mice representing Germans, Poles, Americans, and Jews. These anthropomorphic signifiers of race and nationality—of essential belonging—superficially embrace the idea of group identity, yet Spiegelman's sophisticated verbal/visual narrative strategies call such categorizations into question. One aspect of the critical debate around this topic which has yet to receive much attention is the role *self*-identifying plays in the text: not the identity which is given to a person (whether by ethnic or national heritage, or by other societal consequences), but rather the identities which individuals construct for themselves. From the Jewish characters who try to "pass" as Poles to the Gemeinde and *kombinators* who work with and for the Nazis, *Maus* is suffused with characters who actively construct and renew their identities as individuals, particularly in the face of the all-consuming trauma of the Holocaust. This assumption of authority over the self, which can be seen even in Spiegelman's meta-textual discussions of his own success in *Maus II*, augments the already complex notions of identity present in *Maus*' more general animal metaphors.

In this essay I will examine some of these instances of "self-identifying" in order to discuss the ways in which *Maus*'s characters deal with the question of

identity: a struggle between *expectations* imposed from without versus *ambition* which comes from within. To do so I hope to show how the "animal mask" metaphor becomes the site upon which this struggle to assert one's identity is played out for the reader.

Mask as Metaphor

When I began this project, I was explicitly looking for a way to examine *Maus* *without* invoking its animal mask metaphor. A dubious and ultimately wrongheaded goal, to be sure, yet one I hoped would lead me to new insights. I have grown so accustomed to examining the surface of *Maus*—by that I mean the graphic appearance of the page—that I feared I might be missing out on larger thematic issues. *Maus*'s "animal mask tropes" usually—as indeed they must—engage criticism on the level of general types; however, at this point I was interested in the book's handling of individual characters, and I felt that such a topic might allow me to deal with utterance and action over appearance.

Yet the more I wrote, the more I thought about questions of self-identity, I could not get the animal mask metaphor out of my head—especially when confronted time and again with examples wherein masks are indeed vital to self-representation; Dominick LaCapra states that the "bottomless multiplication of the mask in *Maus* may be one of the most radical gestures in problematizing identity" (LaCapra 1998: 163). I have long believed—no, known—that it was a mistake to divorce the images in comics from their so-called narrative content, and this topic forced me once again to confront this issue.

I use the term *metaphor* intentionally. I believe it is a mistake to operate under the interpretive assumption that *Maus*'s protagonists are mice, as do any number of *Maus*'s critics, even those well-intentioned. "When two of the mice speak of love, you are moved, when they suffer, you weep," writes Umberto Eco on the book's dust jacket, yet the narrative itself puts the lie to the observation. While characters are presented with animal facial appearances (and tails for the mice), the narrative never operates under this assumption: We read of Jews and Poles, not mice and pigs.

Joseph Witek's discussion of *Maus*' relationship to the funny animal genre, from Carl Barks' Disney ducks to R. Crumb's "Fritz the Cat" (Witek 1989: 109-14), makes plain this underlying functionality. The "funny animal" is a comics convention which Spiegelman utilizes in order for readers to hold a privileged—and that is important—interpretive spot from which they may instantly recognize a character's ethnic or national affiliation. When mice/Jews wear pig masks, readers understand immediately that these are Jews in disguise; in terms of the narrative, however, the other characters react to the disguises in a variety of ways—those masks, their boundaries and "strings," are not visible

Fig. 1, *Maus I*, p. 136 (© Art Spiegelman & Pantheon Books)

within the world of the narrative.

These and similar graphic devices can cause confusion in some critics, however. Take, for instance, Sem Dresden's description of the scene in which Vladek and Anja travel disguised through the streets of Sosnowiec (*fig. 1*): "When the father mouse recounts that he thought it dangerous to go out into the street with his wife because she had a markedly Jewish and therefore conspicuous appearance, the problem arises of how to show that in a mouse. Spiegelman draws a mouse without a tail (...) This is startling, maybe even rather amusing, but clearly above all frightening" (qtd. in Schwartz 1999: 291-92).

This is also clearly wrong. To indicate Anja's conspicuous appearance, Spiegelman has in fact drawn an incriminating tail on her, but *not* on Vladek—indicating visually that while Vladek can hide his Jewishness, Anja's ethnicity "sticks out," like the tail sticks out from her clothing. Careful attention to the drawing would make this point clear; but it also points to the need for a better awareness of the ways in which the visual metaphor is used over the course

of the larger narrative.

I'm perhaps preaching to the converted here, but my appeal comes from reading a large amount of *Maus* criticism which makes this fundamental error. Those critics who speak of *Maus*' "mice" usually do not have a background in comics criticism, and thus they miss such nods to *Maus*' "comics-ness," its indebtedness to comics conventions. I adapt the term "comics-ness" from a comment made by filmmaker Ken Jacobs, in a roundtable discussion on the film *Schindler's List* published in the *Village Voice*. Jacobs notes how deeply Steven Spielberg's film is "saturated with movieness" (Hoberman 1994: 25-26)—not necessarily a value judgement on his part.

Later in that same discussion, Spiegelman states: "The main dream image the movie evokes for me is an image of 6 million emaciated Oscar award statuettes hovering like angels in the sky, all wearing striped uniforms" (29). This verbal image is itself steeped in notions of comics caricature, much like many of his more controversial *New Yorker* magazine illustrations: emotionally charged, quickly-apprehended editorial embellishments. Similarly, the original, three-page version of "Maus" (published in *Funny Aminals* [sic], 1972 (Spiegelman 1999)) worked with graphic shorthand, with giant cats—Die Katzen, not Nazis—towering over tiny, terrified mice, not Jews. What we see in *Maus* the book, however, is how Spiegelman's comics shorthand becomes a more subtle, less obvious form of communication when extended over a long-form narrative structure: simple caricatures give way to complex ideas.

Masks: Stepping Outside Oneself

In struggling to come to terms with how these animal appearances—which in many situations take the form of masks—influence a reading of *Maus*, I was struck by the parallels which the animal masks in *Maus* seem to share with the masks used in ancient Greek theater. Masks were first used for the Greek stage in the theatre of Dionysus (early 5th C, BCE). According to Rush Rehm, masks "allow[ed] the actor to merge or to lose himself in alternative identities, fitting for a servant of Dionysus, the god of ecstasy (*ek-stasis*), literally 'standing outside' oneself" (Rehm 1992: 39). It seems to me that the masks in *Maus* are there to facilitate this "standing outside" one's self in a variety of ways, from the problematic idea of group identity to the more specific questions regarding individual selfhood.

Do the animals attempt to represent ethnicity? Not entirely; clearly, the mice represent Jews, an ethnicity which translates across national borders. A Jew in any country looks like a mouse; Germans in Germany are cats; Poles in Poland are pigs. Ethnicities, perhaps; but what of Americans? All Americans look like dogs (although African American dogs are black while other American dogs are

white); but as a nation of immigrants, the United States can claim no single "American" ethnicity.

In his discussion of "New Comedy," a later though still masked form of Greek drama, David Wiles notes that: "[W]e must lay down the initial semiological principle that each mask is not an isolated unit, with a fixed and definable meaning or personality, but that the corpus of masks creates a system of distinctions." (Wiles 1991: 71).

This is perhaps a basic principle when examining Maus: It is nearly impossible to think of the mouse faces without simultaneously considering the cat faces forming a deadly power hierarchy—adding the dog (American) faces extends the power analogy by portraying the war's "winning side" as the natural predator of the Nazi cats. The Poles as pigs confuse—granted, the image of pigs usually carries negative connotations, not the least of which is that they are a non-kosher animal—but pigs hold no place in the power context established by dogs, cats, and mice. Further, the reindeer, frogs, moths, etc., which eventually enter the narrative also do not participate in this food chain analogy. And if these other elements do not fit the analogy, it should therefore cause us to question our initial assumption that the animal masks in *Maus* are meant unproblematically to represent a closed "food chain" system. This slippery metaphor operates as one of the many signals in the book that any systematic categorization of people based on ethnicity, nationality, or other imposed "types" is itself fraught with difficulty.

When Jews within *Maus'* narrative actively attempt to pass for non-Jewish Poles, they are depicted wearing pig masks, a graphic representation of their struggle to stand apart from or outside of their own ethnicity, their Jewishness. They actively seek to take on a new persona: that of the (relatively) privileged Pole, not the (definitely) oppressed Jew. In Greek theater, the *prosôpon* or *persona* was the character which the masked actor assumed, *prosôpon* meaning simultaneously "'face,' 'mask,' and 'dramatic character', literally meaning 'towards the eye'", as "the ancient Greek language identified a human being metonymically with his or her head or eyes" (Rehm 1992: 40). While disguise in *Maus* usually includes a form of dress, it is through the metaphorical mask device alone that readers recognize a character in disguise.

In the scene where Vladek, passing as a Pole, meets up with a disguised Jew in Sosnowiec, the panels are framed in such a way that even we, as privileged readers, are at first kept in the dark as to the other man's "true identity." The left-hand panel borders crop the "pig's" face so that, in not allowing us full view of the character's face (his entire persona), we might not see the mask device (*fig. 2*). Only when he identifies himself as a Jew are we allowed to see the mask in place—only then do we as readers learn that the other man, like Vladek, is in the process of standing outside his true self.

Masks can force viewers to examine the character behind them all the more closely. David Wiles states that the "neutral mask obliged the spectator to judge

Fig. 2, *Maus I*, p. 138 (© Art Spiegelman & Pantheon Books)

Agamemnon or Oedipus not by his appearance but by his actions" (Wiles 1991: 68). The Polish pig faces in *Maus* are perhaps the most "neutral" of the personae, for Poles (and pigs) are not made explicitly a part of the main cat/mouse, German/Jew dichotomy. Clothing, pose, dialogue—all of these visual elements contribute to characterization, to individuating these at-first-glance identical characters. The same can be said, of course, for the Jews; we find a wide range of character types, all of whom are visually remarkably similar. The Germans are most generally stereotyped as "evil Nazis," yet even still we see, late in the narrative, an intermarried German/Jewish family, with cat-striped mice for children (Spiegelman 1991: 131, 1-4).

This "standing outside oneself" holds parallels to theories of autobiography, as well. Nancy K. Miller has noted that what has been considered a women's autobiographical strategy—"self-portrayal through the relation to a privileged other" (Miller 1996: 109)—can and should be nuanced to include many male autobiographical works, including *Maus*. Miller's argument explicitly addresses Artie's relationship with his Mother as the "privileged other"; yet I think that in *Maus*, every character who strives to self-identify operates in opposition to a privileged other—what are the Holocaust-era Jews doing if not seeking an identity (free human being) in opposition to a privileged other (the Nazi sociopolitical regime)?

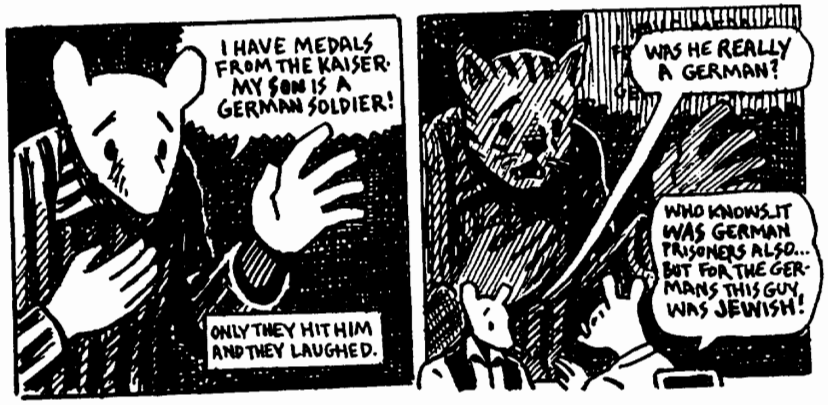

Fig. 3, *Maus II*, p. 50 (© Art Spiegelman & Pantheon Books)

The animal mask device makes this status of "otherness" visually explicit. At the same time, it complicates the idea of otherness by including not just a Jew/mouse mask, but masks for every different type of group. There is no normative visual state in Maus; *everyone* is in fact an "other," always at some point visually defined in opposition to someone else.

There are times in *Maus* when a character's ethnic/national identity is unclear, even from the omniscient viewpoint of the picture plane. The prisoner in Auschwitz who maintains that he is in fact German, not Jewish, is represented with a mouse face (*fig. 3*). The dissonance between his statements and his appearance reinforce the opinion that the man is a liar—a "complainer" as Vladek calls him—since to this point (leaving aside "Prisoner on the Hell Planet") every Jew has been portrayed with a mouse's face, every German with a cat's. However, to indicate Vladek's uncertainty over the man's identity, Spiegelman provides a contrasting drawing of the man in the guise of a cat. Vladek's words, though, are telling: "Who knows? It ***was*** German prisoners also... But for the Germans this guy was Jewish!" (Spiegelman 1991: 50, 4).

As Rehm notes, "Masks confront the audience with ambiguities of appearance and change, instantiating the conflicting urge to schematize and personify" (Rehm 1992: 39). By redrawing the same character using both interpretive faces, Spiegelman acknowledges the difficulty of knowing ethnicity for certain, either by appearance or by utterance. Simultaneously, this tactic acknowledges that, in positions where one group has power over another, essence counts for little in the face (so to speak) of pre-determined identity.

In another fashion, *Maus* portrays Jews who try openly to alter their identity through political allegiance. Some members of the *Gemeinde*, the Jewish community organization, attempt to work with their oppressors; the Jewish police officers work with the Nazis as well; and later the *kombinators* try to side with

both Jews and Germans as the opportunity arises. It would not seem unlikely, perhaps, if such characters had been drawn wearing cat masks; after all, these are Jews who attempt, in their fashion, to blend in with the Germans.

Yet while the Jewish police's manner of dress, at least, identifies their special, privileged status, their faces—the final test of their identity in *Maus*—remain those of mice. Their switch in identity, as a matter of public convenience, fools—and, granted, attempts to fool—no one, especially not the reader. Even while working with and for the enemy, these Jews do not fundamentally act to alter or avoid the ethnic expectations of the Germans; they simply wish for personal leniency and privilege. Haskel, the Jewish officer who plays cards with the Gestapo, still needs to allow himself to lose at cards in order to remain in the Gestapo's good graces (Spiegelman 1986: 116-17).

Masks on the Human Face: "Auschwitz (Time Flies)"

Perhaps the most significant instance of identity assertion in *Maus*, however, is the extraordinary introduction to *Maus II*, chapter two, "Auschwitz (Time Flies)." The "Art Spiegelman" we meet in the first six-and-one-half pages of this chapter is *not* identical to the character "Artie" in the narrative. Apart from the most obvious difference—this character is clearly human, depicted as wearing a mouse mask—is the fact that this "Art Spiegelman" operates with a certain amount of knowledge about the story and its reception that "Artie," trapped within the story, does not possess. While the main narrative of *Maus* is built around the concept of the flashback, this section is a sort of flash-forward in which the author—or, to be more precise, his cipher, his adapted persona—addresses the circumstances in which the book is being created.

Commenting on this scene, Richard Martin has said: "[T]he narrator is both Spiegelman pretending to be Art, son of Vladek, in the comic strip narration, and, by drawing himself full face to the reader, he becomes that very Art, a 'fictional' character—fictionalized by slipping into the guise of the anthropomorphic animal character. The mask-wearing author is thus able, on the one hand, to distance himself from the narrative, but also to present his awareness of the impossibility of doing so, and thus of the paradoxical dilemma of his position." (Martin 1994: 381).

Of course, the most striking aspect of this scene is how it graphically demonstrates Spiegelman's guilt: *Maus*'s success—his success—is here literally built upon the dead six million (*fig. 4*). Yet the fact that this Spiegelman is a mouse-masked human contrasts strikingly with the mouse-headed bodies piled below him. About masks in Greek theater, Rehm notes, "[M]asks blur the lines between a group (grasped by recognizing similarities) and separate individuals (identified by isolating differences)" (Rehm 1992: 40). Self-reflexively,

Fig. 4, *Maus II*, p. 41(© Art Spiegelman & Pantheon Books)

Spiegelman both identifies with the Jews of the past, yet he also realizes that time and circumstance have changed him—and the world—as well.

By drawing all of the characters in this section as masked humans (himself; Pavel, his survivor-psychiatrist; and the various reporters and entrepreneurs who harass him), Spiegelman makes a move to somehow universalize, or at least compartmentalize, his own present-day experience. Yet that very act of compartmentalization is itself inauthentic. The mask categories serve, in one sense, to show the international effect which *Maus I* had: we recognize masks for Jews, Germans, and Americans, at least. Yet the artificiality of the metaphor itself is heightened even more. While always artificial, the image of a mask on a mouse-headed human only slightly increases the layers of abstraction; here, however, the images take on additional slipperiness. Miles Orvell comments: "The self-consciousness of the stereotyping here, along with the implication that the whole structure of masking entails an inauthenticity for Spiegelman (in the late twentieth century) markedly different from his father's more authentic assumption of the mouse identity" (Orvell 1992: 125).

I would question Orvell's last point here: I don't believe that Vladek assumes a mouse identity, but that Spielgeman imposes that metaphor on all Jews—even Artie—within the main *Maus* narrative. However, it seems certain that Spiegelman asks us to ponder the metaphor's authenticity. By showing the

"seams" of fiction here even more explicitly, he asks us to question the categories he's imposed all over again.

The very title of this chapter is significant in this respect. The previous chapter is entitled "Mauschwitz," playfully punning on the mouse metaphor (as does, indeed, the title *Maus* itself). In the narrative, of course, the characters use the real place name, Auschwitz. For this present chapter, however, where the weight of the past comes crashing into the present, the metaphor's limits are exploded, and linguistic puns seem no longer fitting to the tone. "Mauschwitz" becomes "Auschwitz": no mistaking metaphors—Jews are Jews, not mice; the camp is Auschwitz, not a cleverly-titled stand-in. When the mask becomes clearly a metaphor, the truth behind it shines more clearly.

Conclusion

Of course, it would be an error to re-think *Maus*'s masks completely within the terms and schema of Greek drama. There are, to be sure, substantial differences. Rehm tells us: "[M]asked acting in a large outdoor theatre imposed on Greek drama a generic account of human existence. Characters operated more on an ethical than on a psychological level, their status depending on qualities that were socially recognized and sanctioned, not on peculiarities of individual behavior or consciousness" (Rehm 1992: 49). Spiegelman's use of masked appearance is only one element in the development of the narrative; characterization is of utmost importance in relating the interelationships among the various members of the Spiegelman family, past and present, as well as among many other characters.

Still, I believe the idea of Greek dramatic masks is a useful tool in addressing, at least in part, the function of masks in *Maus*. As slippery signifiers of belonging, as malleable forms of disguise, and as codifications of assumptions, the animal mask metaphor comments on the book's narrative concerns in ways separate from—yet utterly tied to—its textual center. Just as Vladek's friends' comment about his visual similarity to Valentino did not adequately address his character, so too do blanket generalizations about ethnicity—whether Nazi propaganda or comic-book animal masks—fail to encompass the human condition. A final quote from Rehm: "In Greek tragedy, both characters and spectators must face what they would rather not, a paradoxical compulsion epitomized by the unflinching stare of the actor's mask" (Rehm 1992: 40). This description seems to me a cogent description of *Maus*'s enterprise: To force us to confront not only the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust, but also the only slightly smaller horror of prejudice in its more mundane aspects.

I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Curley of the Classics Department at Skidmore College for his assistance and guidance in my research on the use of masks in ancient Greek drama, though any errors in interpretation are my own.

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Section B

INTRODUCTION
Transatlantic Encounters of the Second Type

Jan BAETENS
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The essays collected in this volume were first presented at the international conference on the Graphic Novel hosted by the Institute for Cultural Studies (University of Leuven, Belgium) on 12-13 May 2000. As such, this conference was not the first of its name. Two years earlier, in November 1998, the University of Massachusets at Amherst had already hosted a "1st International Conference on the Graphic Novel". Both were intended to celebrate the XX-th anniversary of Will Eisner's A Contract With God (the first work to be labelled as the 'graphic novel'), and to create a new forum for academic scholarship on a fast-growing field. The Leuven conference picks up the Amherst thread, which the two institutions are eager to develop. And yet, there are considerable differences with its transatlantic counterpart, which cannot be erased by their use of a common title. In the United States, the genre of the graphic novel, although more clearly defined as with Europe (at least in the domain of visual studies), is not yet fully recognized as a serious artistic practice. In Europe, and more specifically in Belgium and France, the situation is quite different: comics have been more or less canonized during the last decades, but the very term of 'graphic novel' remains largely unknown, if not systematically misunderstood, as was shown by the frequent confusion between graphic and gothic novel during the preparation of the conference.

This example is not just a joke, but a symptom of a deeply rooted suspicion towards the medium in American academy, as well as the symptom of a certain terminological and linguistic confusion in Europe, provoked by the encounter of many national and international traditions. In the United States and increasingly in Britain (definitely a non-European market in this respect) the 'graphic novel' is, at least theoretically, used to make a clear-cut distinction between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys', between comics pulp fiction and more or less high-art visual narratives in book-form whose ambition it is to save the literary heritage in an illiterate world (one should not forget however that the term 'graphic' means also 'hyperdescriptive', and that this meaning explains the existence within the purely literary field of the so-called subset of 'graphic', i.e. almost hyperrealistically descriptive novels, of which some stunning examples are

discussed in this volume). In Europe, this distinction also exists, but it would be unfair to claim that its impact is the same as in the United States and Britain. Europeans don't debunk their 'popular' comics, nor do they have to wait for the American label in their search for 'other', i.e. more complex comics (thanks to the efforts of American scholars such as David Kunzle, and contemporary European comics historians such as Thierry Groensteen or Charles Dierick and Pascal Lefèvre, we now know that there have been graphic novels as long as there have been comics in Europe, a tradition much older than that of the American newspaper comics).

The main difference, however, is not just a matter of sociological appreciation of cultural distinction, as Bourdieu would say. In fact, the big issue which separates the American and the European efforts towards a transformation of the comics genre has to do with their different visions of the word and image problem. Indeed, the American graphic novel considers itself a literary genre: a novel, not made by words, but by images, balloons and captions. In 'graphic novel', the important word is 'novel', not 'graphic'.

In Europe, or at least in the French-speaking or French-influenced parts of Europe such as Belgium, the emphasis is put much more on the word 'graphic'. This helps to explain why so many contemporary European graphic authors (for instance grouped around the publishing houses L'Association in Paris and even more so at Fréon in Brussels) no longer 'illustrate' or visualize stories, but try to create new types of storytelling, where methods and contents of plot and narration are engendered by the search for and the use of a new visual logic.

These two main differences, the higher sociocultural ranking of comics in Europe on the one hand and the emphasis put on visuality on the other, explain why the Leuven conference discusses such a broad scope of interdisciplinary issues. Indeed, since there is no strong need to promote and defend the medium, and since the narrative use of fixed images is not a problem whose importance should be limited to the comics or graphic novel field, there is room for many other questions which link the medium to other issues in contemporary society, art, and theory (the natural 'biotope' or natural surroundings of the organizing institution, the Leuven Institute for Cultural Studies). Actually, these issues are twofold. Firstly, that of trauma representation, an issue which by definition escapes any imaginable specific field. Secondly, that of a wide range of topics related to the concept of 'visual narrative', an issue which can only be studied by comparing as many media and practices as possible. The essays of this volume, which present the complete proceedings of the conference, are grouped here in two major parts, each one being divided into two further sections, their focus depending on either a more general topic or on a very specific graphic author. The first part of the

book, "Violence and trauma in the Graphic Novel", opens with a certain number of reflections on the representation of violence in literary and visual graphic novels, and continues with a whole set of close readings of graphic novels by Art Spiegelman (*Maus I* and *II*) and Jacques Tardi (whose masterpiece *C'était la guerre des tranchées* is still waiting for its complete English translation). The second part of the book presents in the first place a survey of the current graphic novel production, and insists sharply on the great variety of 'continental' traditions (for instance, underground 'comix', and feminist comics, high-art graphic novels, critical superheroes-fiction) whose boundaries are increasingly fuzzy. It continues and ends with a set of theoretical interventions where not only the reciprocal influences of national and international traditions, but also those between genres and media are strongly forwarded, the emphasis being here mainly on problems concerning ways of looking and positions of spectatorship.

The organizers of the conference would finally like to sincerely thank all persons and institutions whose help, both intellectually and financially, have made the conference and the publication of its proceedings possible: the Institute for Cultural Studies, the Faculty of Arts and the Department of Literary Studies at the K.U.Leuven, the FWO (Belgian National Science Foundation), the Flemish graduate program of Literary Theory), the American Embassy in Brussels, and the VVALW (Flemish Association for Literary Theory and Comparative Literature). Thanks again to all for their enthusiasm and generosity.