

SEEING BEYOND LANGUAGE: WHEN WORDS ARE NOT ALONE

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ABSTRACT

The nature of “text” is currently undergoing a change whereby verbal components are increasingly being accompanied by visual components, and the two modes of expression co-exist side by side in the same texts. However, this change is not being accompanied by an adequate and systematic investigation of the complex relationship between the verbal and the visual, which still remain fundamentally considered only as separate entities.

This article proposes that the combination of verbal and visual components is a true interaction which creates a type of “language” that is more than a simple sum of the two codes. Moreover, it claims that such an interaction obtains on two levels: on an inter-semiotic level, i.e. between words and pictures, as well as on an intra-semiotic level, i.e. within words and within pictures.

Through the analysis of some excerpts taken from *Maus*, one of the most well-known graphic novels, this article aims to show that words and pictures are not semiotically “pure” in that the ones often exhibit some (semantically important) characteristics of the others. At the same time emphasis is placed on the ways in which words and pictures collaborate in the conveyance of meaning.

KEY WORDS

Graphic novel, comics, semiotics, sign, code, icon, symbol, panel.

RESUMEN

La naturaleza del “texto” está sufriendo actualmente un cambio por el que los componentes verbales están acompañados cada vez más por componen-

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tes visuales, y los modos de expresión coexisten codo con codo en los mismos textos. Sin embargo, este cambio no viene acompañado por una investigación adecuada y sistemática de las complejas relaciones entre lo verbal y lo visual, que aún siguen siendo considerados fundamentalmente como entidades separadas.

Este artículo sugiere que la combinación de componentes verbales y visuales constituye una verdadera interacción que crea un tipo de “lenguaje” que es más que la suma simple de los dos códigos. Además, defiende que esta interacción se obtiene a dos niveles: a un nivel inter-semiótico, es decir, entre palabras e ilustraciones, y también a un nivel intra-semiótico, es decir, las palabras entre sí y las ilustraciones entre sí.

Por medio del análisis de algunos extractos tomados de Maus, una de las novelas gráficas más conocidas, este artículo pretende demostrar que las palabras y las ilustraciones no son semióticamente “puras” en el sentido de que unas muestran a menudo algunas características (semánticamente relevantes) de las otras. Al mismo tiempo, se subraya el modo en que palabras e ilustraciones colaboran en la transmisión de significado.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Novela gráfica, comics, semiótica, signo, código, icono, símbolo, panel.

RÉSUMÉ

La nature du “texte” est en train de subir actuellement un changement selon lequel les éléments verbaux sont accompagnés de plus en plus par des composantes visuelles et les façons de dire coexistent côte à côte dans les textes. Cependant, ce changement ne vient pas accompagné d’une recherche adéquate et systématique des rapports complexes entre le verbal et le visuel, qui continuent encore à être considérés foncièrement comme des entités séparées.

Cet article suggère que la combinaison de composantes verbales et visuelles constitue une véritable interaction créant un genre de “langage” qui est davantage que la simple addition des deux codes. En plus, il défend que cette interaction est obtenue à deux niveaux: à un niveau inter-sémiotique, c’est-à-dire, entre les mots et les images et à un niveau intra-sémantique aussi, c’est-à-dire, des mots entr’eux et des images entr’elles.

Au moyen de l’analyse de quelques extraits tirés de Maus, l’un des romans graphiques les plus connus, cet article prétend démontrer que les mots et les images ne sont pas sémiotiquement “pures” au sens que les uns montrent souvent des caractéristiques (sémantiquement relevantes) des autres. En même temps, on souligne comment les mots et les images collaborent dans la transmission du sens.

MOTS-CLÉ

Roman graphique, bandes dessinées, sémiotique, signe, code, icône, symbole, pannel.

*Semiotic systems are not “synonymous”;
... In other words, two semiotic systems of different types
cannot be mutually interchangeable
(Benveniste, 1986, p. 235)*

1. BACKGROUND

1.1. *The text: Art Spiegelman’s Maus*

Maus is a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman, an American Jew. It was published in the magazine *Raw* between 1980 and 1991. In book format *Maus - A Survivor’s Tale* was published into two volumes: the first one appeared in 1986, with the subtitle “My Father Bleeds History”, and the second one in 1991, with the subtitle “And Here my Troubles began”.

From the point of view of the medium employed, the appearance of *Maus* represented a very strong statement against the idea that comics could only have light-hearted themes:

Maus is the use of a traditionally “low” genre –the comic strip or book– for serious, grave material. It is a conscious, intentional inversion of a norm, a hierarchy, a cultural order. It is a very “strong” (in the Bloomian sense) rereading of one survivor’s tale and the transmission or testimony of this tale to the son; it is at the same time a strong revamping or reconsideration of the generic possibilities of the “comic” itself.

(Anonymous, <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/holocaust/spiegelman.html>)

In *Maus* there is not just one story, but at least three: the story of Vladek, a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz; the story of the relationship between Artie (the author) and Vladek (his father); and the story of how the novel itself was created. The first two stories are closely interconnected, and this relationship is built on and revolves around the third, which constitutes a relatively simple narrative thread - Vladek tells his story of the Holocaust to Artie, who records everything on a notepad.

On a superficial level, *Maus* is a book about the horrors of the Holocaust, recounted by one of the few who survived it, therefore not too dissimilar, for example, from Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*. This initial reading is reinforced by the cover graphics and by the subtitle - *A Survivor’s Tale*. In this regard, *Maus* certainly belongs to a category

of extremely important historical accounts, of which there could not be enough. However, from a purely stylistic point of view, the novel would not have been so original and interesting if the “survivor’s tale” had been its only component.

For one thing, a more in-depth reading reveals that in *Maus* the survival is not only that of Vladek from Auschwitz but also that of Artie from Vladek himself. Indeed, the word ‘survivor’ acquires a more metaphorical sense, in a novel where metaphor is a key element for its reading(s). The experience of the lager had irreparably transformed Vladek into a man it was almost impossible to live with. His wife Anja survived the concentration camps but did not survive Vladek - she committed suicide. His son Artie, instead, despite the psychological problems, was stronger: he is the second survivor in *Maus*.

1.2. *Theoretical context*

The main idea of this article is based on the consideration that

...the communicational and representational landscape, the *semiotic landscape*, has changed in far-reaching ways over the last 40 years or so in the so-called developed countries. The visual is now much more prominent as a form of communication than it has been for several centuries, in the so-called developed world at least. This change is having effects on the forms and characteristics of texts. Not only is written language less in the centre of this new landscape, and less central as a means of communication, but the change is producing texts which are strongly *multi-modal*.

(Kress, Leite-García and van Leeuwen, 1997, p. 257)

and that, despite such change in the ‘semiotic landscape’,

The common-sense notion that language is *the* medium of representation and communication is still deeply entrenched in Western literate societies [and] the academic disciplines founded on language or concerned with its investigation ... resist even now considering non-language materials as essential sources and materials for their activities.

(1997, p. 257)

Consequently, a relatively unexplored area of potential research is evidently delineated. An area, however, which precisely because of its being little known, may generate some anxiety and some inevitable hesitation as regards methods, terminology and frameworks for investigation. Despite some pioneer studies (Gombrich, 1960; Goodman, 1969; Barthes, 1977; Nodelman, 1988; Mitchell, 1994). “The develop-

ment of a theoretical academic framework for exploring the links between visual and verbal language is still in its infancy” (Goodman, 1996, p. 38).

Referring to the American Sign Language, Charles Fillmore wrote that

...either the scope of linguistics must reach *beyond* language strictly defined, or the concept language must be extended to include the rich and powerful symbolic system of the kind we see here.

(Fillmore, 1977, cited in Rauch, 1980, p. 329, my emphasis)

I believe that this observation remains entirely valid if it refers to other codes too. As texts become increasingly multimodal, linguistics needs to widen its scope *beyond* words proper, to consider the ways in which other codes collaborate with the verbal constituents in the creation of meaning.

Multimodality characterises a variety of text types: advertisements, newspapers, the Internet, children’s books, TV, film, all utilise a mix of verbal and visual codes to convey meaning. Among them is also comics, a medium where the relationship between words and pictures is particularly pervasive and, at the same time, extremely varied in its forms (see Witeck, 1989; Harvey, 1994). It is through the analysis of a comics text, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, that I will attempt to argue the following two points:

In this article I will focus on the following two points:

1. words, as well as pictures, are not necessarily to be considered semiotically ‘pure’, i.e. pertaining to only one system of signs, but the two often acquire the characteristics of each other;
2. when verbal and visual codes coexist in the same text, the meaning is not normally conveyed by the two codes separately, but by their interaction.

It is often agreed that the main parameter of difference between the way in which words and pictures convey meaning is precision. Specifically, pictures are thought to be rather vague and their meanings open to interpretation, while language is believed to convey meaning much more precisely (Barthes, 1977; Corner, 1983; Abbott, 1986; Nodelman, 1988; Bianchi and Farello, 1997).

An explicit criticism of this idea comes from Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996), who argue that “...we have to move away from the position which Roland Barthes took in his essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image’...” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 16). Their main argu-

ment is that "...the visual component of a text is an independently organised and structured message - connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it..." (1996, p. 17).

This represents an important step forward in the recognition of the complex semantic values of images. However, Kress and van Leeuwen focus their attention primarily on images, and do not "examine how visual and verbal narratives combine to create meaning" (Hassall, 1998, p. 2), while the "relationship between written text and the visual image [remains] a relatively recent area of study" (1998, p. 2).

Indeed the problem is that different media tend to be simply compared to one another in order to find similarities and dissimilarities, and the fact that "all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image)" (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 94-5) is often disregarded.

2. *Seeing words and reading pictures*

Since Saussure, the linguistic sign has been generally considered to be semiotically arbitrary, conventional and *symbolic*. The pictorial sign, on the other hand, has been regarded as one in which the signifier is linked to the signified by virtue of resemblance, and therefore as being *iconic*.

In fact, it can be shown that between iconic and symbolic signs there is no clear-cut divide but rather a continuum along which signs possess, at one time and in varying proportions, iconic as well as symbolic features.

No picture is pure image; all of them, still and moving, graphic and photographic, are 'talking pictures', either literally, or in association with contextual speech, writing or discourse.

(Hartley, 1992, p. 28)

In this respect Guy Cook observes that "For a sign to be truly iconic, it would have to be transparent to someone who had never seen it before - and it seems unlikely that this is as much the case as sometimes supposed" (Cook, 1992, p. 70). Even signs with a high degree of iconicity like photographs cannot be said to be analogues of reality, since their recognition is not natural but derives from training (Eco, 1982, p. 33; Fiske, 1990, p. 56; Goodman, 1996, p. 42-43).

John Fiske defines this varying degree of iconicity in terms of convention: "Convention is necessary to the understanding of any sign, however iconic or indexical it is" (Fiske, 1990, p. 56). Therefore, rather than separate categories, he suggests a scale, at whose opposite ends he places the symbol and the icon: the more a sign needs convention

to be interpreted, the more it is closer to the symbol end of the scale, and vice versa.

Such a scale would look like this:

icon <—————> symbol

where at the icon end are natural, motivated and analogical signs, and at the symbol end are conventional, arbitrary and digital signs.

A scale of degrees of symbolicity/iconicity necessarily presupposes the idea that most signs are, in varying proportions, both symbolic *and* iconic. So, for example, the interpretation of a stylised drawing relies more on convention than does the interpretation of a realistic painting, and therefore the former is closer to the symbol end than the latter:

icon <———— realistic painting stylised drawing ————> symbol

Because the most conventional, arbitrary and digital code is verbal language, saying that any given sign is closer to the symbol end of the scale is equivalent to saying that the sign is closer to verbal language. That is precisely why the high degree of stylisation of most comics allows Will Eisner to affirm that:

In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language - a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art.

(Eisner, 1985, p. 8)

The readers of comics learn how to associate certain repetitive pictorial elements with specific meanings, effectively treating them as linguistic units. Scott McCloud, another comics artist, has also discussed the effects of the stylisation of comics drawings and has reached similar conclusions (McCloud, 1994, pp. 24-59).

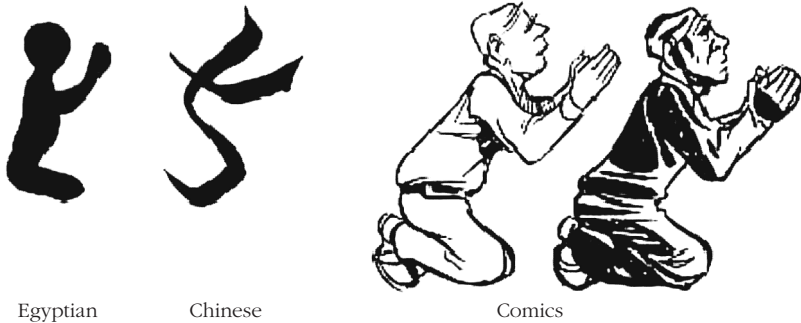
At the same time, one should not overlook the fact that writing is ultimately a graphic representation of verbal language and, as such, not necessarily purely symbolic. Again, it is a matter of degrees, rather than absolute categories. The Latin alphabet, which is employed by most Western written languages, is generally considered to be a highly conventional and arbitrary code and so are the Cyrillic and the Greek alphabets, but other languages use different kinds of written signs which may not be so arbitrary. Chinese writing, for example, represents an instance of a symbolic code which simultaneously possesses evident iconic properties. This difference is due to the fact that Latin, Cyrillic,

Greek and many other alphabets are employed in “sound writing”, whereby “an idea has to be translated first into the sounds of a particular word or sentence in a particular language, then those sounds have to be made visible in the form of ... signs which more often than not bear no relation to the content of the original thought” (Gaur, 1984, p. 15). Whereas Chinese adopts “thought writing”, which “transmits an idea directly; the drawing of a leg means ‘leg’ or ‘to go’, the drawing of a tree means ‘tree’ ... the drawing of two trees can mean ‘forest’ and so forth” (pp. 14-15). The scripts of the ancient Egyptians, where the iconic nature of the signs is even more evident, also belong to the category of “thought writing”.

Thus, Latin, Chinese and ancient Egyptian writing can be placed on different points along the icon/symbol scale:



Interestingly, Will Eisner compares Egyptian and Chinese writing to comics:



(Eisner, 1985: 15)

Apart from the intrinsic iconicity of different alphabets, the sole fact that it is a graphic representation grants written language *iconic potential*. That is to say, the semantic value of any written language, including those that belong to the category of “sound writing”, is not necessarily entirely contained within the verbo-linguistic meaning, but is also expressed, at least potentially, by the visual aspect of writing.

Indeed the importance of the visuality of writing is evident in virtually all media where written language is employed, such as newspapers, advertising, the Internet, television, etc.

One elementary visual aspect of writing which is used extremely commonly is size, which is normally directly associated with importance. Road signs, posters, newspaper headlines etc. all utilize different sizes of lettering in order to render different degrees of importance. Other devices are also commonly employed (sometimes in conjunction with size) to convey stress and/or emphasis, like italics and bold letters. Another visual aspect of writing which is sometimes exploited is typeface. As Susan Goodman observes, “the typeface in which a text, or part of a text, is set can convey vast amounts of connotative meaning - it can convey a mood, signal clues as to content or even suggest a point of view” (Goodman, 1996, p. 45).

Other visual aspects, like colour, for example, are also widely employed, which extend the meaning of written expressions. In advertisements “the verbal language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: in other words, writing is another form of image-making, too” (Goddard, 1998, p. 16).

Guy Cook offers perhaps the most comprehensive analysis: “The number of ways in which advertising exploits the paralanguage of writing is staggeringly large” (Cook, 1992, p. 77). He distinguishes eight different ways in which language acquires iconic features (pp. 78-85):

1. iconicity with words;
2. iconicity by letter shape;
3. connected icons and symbols;
4. connected icons and arbitrary signs;
5. writing which provokes iconic behaviour;
6. indexical graphology;
7. writing imitating another writing system, creating an index of another culture;
8. mood evocation through typeface.

In the specific case of comics, Will Eisner claims that “lettering, treated graphically and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery” (Eisner, 1985, p. 20). Similarly, Fischer notes that in comics “...typography acquires a new freedom, unknown in history. It is drawn by hand, unlike the traditional uniform typography, and it progressively becomes image” (Fischer, 1986, p. 225, my translation).

The cover of *Maus* (Fig. 1) provides interesting elements indicating symbolism in pictures and iconicity in words. The title of the novel has, for its size and position, a very prominent place. Indeed, this is common for most cover pages: the title attracts the reader’s attention

thanks to a careful and studied layout. In this particular cover, however, the visual potential is further exploited. The title of *Maus* conveys its meaning on different level. In semiotic terms, it could be said that the title incorporates various signs which pertain to different codes. The verbal plane itself can be divided into two separate levels:

- 1) The phonology level: the word 'maus' is the equivalent of the English word 'mouse'.
- 2) The orthography level: the unusual, German-like, spelling already loads the word with some extra potential meaning.

Here, though, it is not only these considerations that must be taken into account, since in comics words are not printed, but *drawn*. The visual plane is equally important and can also be dissected into sub-levels:

- 1) The level of the typeface: it can be observed that the style of the lettering mimics that of the 'SS' emblem. So, the general sense of *germanicity* given by the spelling of 'maus' becomes much more precise once the analysis moves from the purely verbal plane to the graphic plane: the relation is not with Germany in general any more, but with a very specific historical and ideological aspect of Germany.

- 2) The pictorial level: apart from a easily identifiable typeface, the letters that compose the word mouse also contain pictorial elements, which render the meaning even more precise. The letters are coloured in red and are drawn in such a way as to depict blood stains, so that the whole title of the book looks as if it has been written with blood. It is at this point that the idea of the Holocaust comes about.

So the title of *Maus* constitutes a sign whose signifier is composed not only of a mere succession of m-a-u-s, but also of a graphic component, without which the link to the signifier would not be properly established.

However, in the signification process the reference to the Holocaust is not yet sufficiently clear. The decoding continues in the rest of the cover, which contains two completely pictorial elements. The first one shows a Hitler-like face on a swastika background. Both the Hitler face and the swastika are signs which strongly reinforce the reference to Nazi Germany, and the idea of the Holocaust becomes more apparent. The second picture shows two creatures with an expression of fear on their faces.

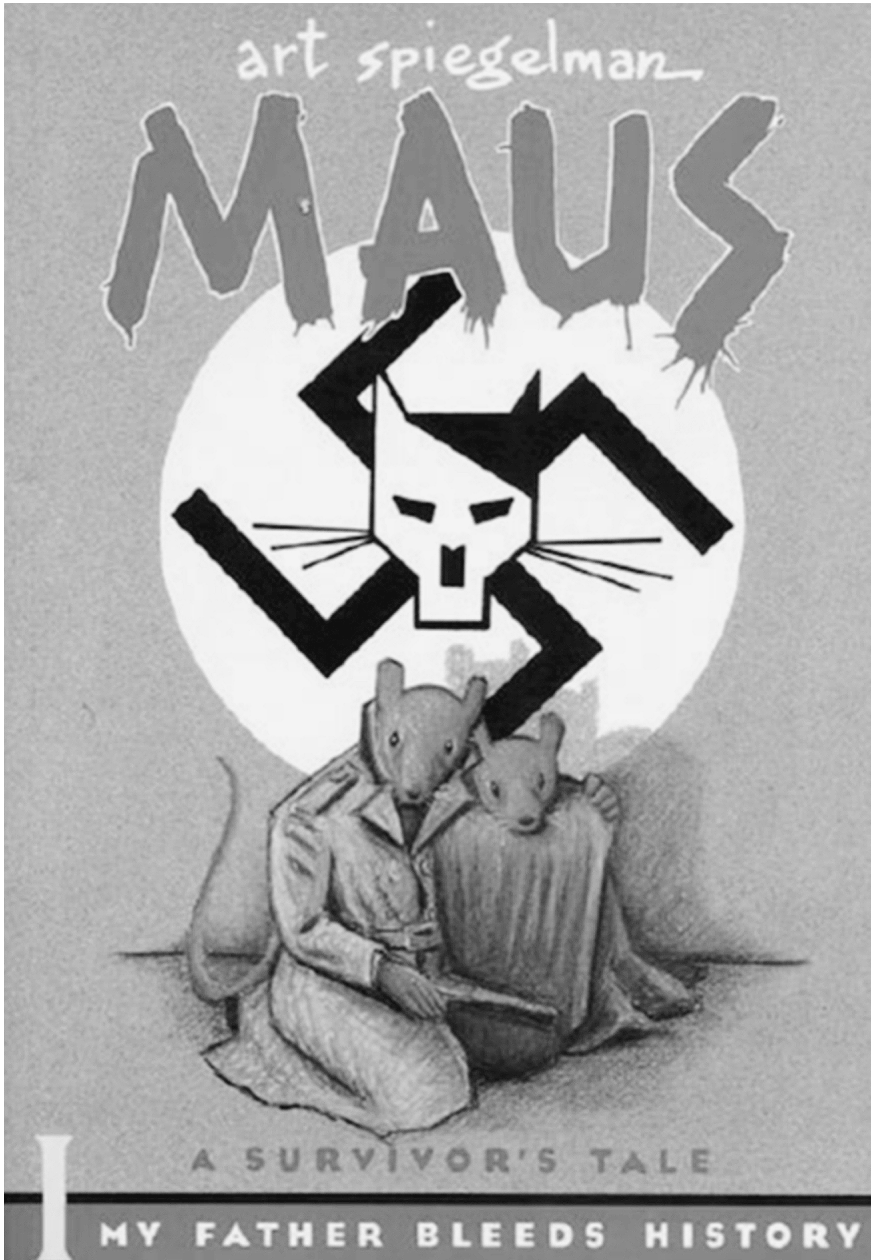
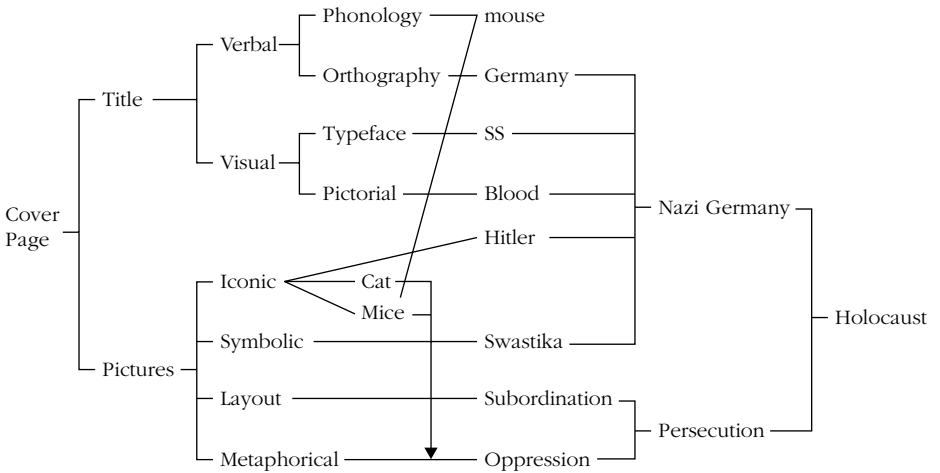


Figure 1.

Various other elements indicate that the kind of relationship that exists between the subjects of the two pictures is one of oppression. First of all, the positioning: the Hitler-like face is above the two beings, which conveys a sense of subordination. Secondly, both pictures contain signs which refer to specific animals: the shape of the Hitler face, of its ears, and its eyes, plus the presence of whiskers are all clear signs which refer to the idea of 'cat'. The two beings in the second picture, instead, have evident mouse-like features. The signs 'cat' and 'mouse', in turn, exploit the well-known metaphor of 'cat and mouse' and serve to establish the relationship between the subjects of the two pictures. Also, the mouse-features with which the Jews are depicted explain the choice of the word 'maus' for the title. The signified 'Holocaust' is now much more manifest and visible.

It is significant that manifest and visible (and all their synonyms) are words that pertain to the plane of the visual. Indeed, this analysis of the cover page of *Maus* could represent an argument against the notion of "anchorage" theorised by Roland Barthes and taken up and re-elaborated by others. Here it is the visual elements, rather than the verbal ones, that focus the meaning and direct the reader/viewer towards the right interpretation. The complex signification process at play in this cover page can be shown in a diagram.



As the diagram shows, the verbal element plays only a marginal role and much of the signification process relies on the visual plane.

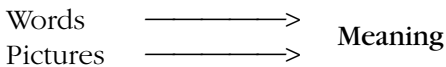
The cover page also contains two subtitles at the bottom. The first one is a survivor's tale, which, unlike the main title, is not visually significant, in that its semantic value is purely verbal. Its meaning reinforces the reference to the Holocaust, but its relevance is much greater in relation to the story as a whole than to the details of the cover page.

The second sub-title, "my father bleeds history", seems to have a stronger connection with the main title. Indeed, it would be difficult not to see a link between the stains of blood which form the word *maus* and the verb 'bleeds'. The meaning of such a link, which is somewhat blurred in the cover page, becomes clearer as soon as the reader realises that the main story of *Maus* is told by the author's father Vladek. So, the blood with which the main title appears to have been written acquires another significance: it symbolises the fact that the story is told by Vladek, who 'bleeds' it because of the excruciating pains narrated.

3. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES

Comics are thought to have a higher level of comprehensibility than conventional literature thanks to the fact that "Illustration and prose, interacting within each panel, provide a redundancy of information that aids understanding" (Wright and Sherman, 1994, p. 45).

According to this notion, the message, in comics, would be conveyed by two parallel and concurrent signifiers which refer to the same signified:



Theoretically, the presence of two processes of signification would enable one to remove any one of the signifiers without the conveyance of the meaning being affected. Figure 2 is an extract from an illustrated version of *Gulliver's Travels*:

As can be seen, the words say exactly what the pictures show, in a relationship of perfect redundancy: the removal of either words or pictures would not cause any loss in meaning. Because the story is targeted at primary school pupils, the redundancy of information is meant to effectively aid understanding. In cases like this, the function of the pictures is to provide a sort of visual definition for the words, so that the child can improve his vocabulary and reading skills.

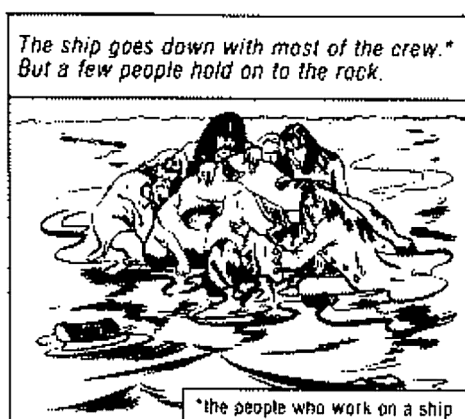
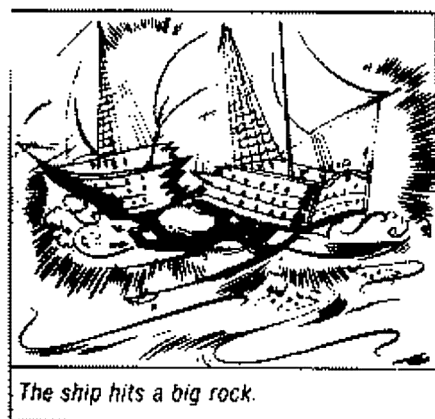
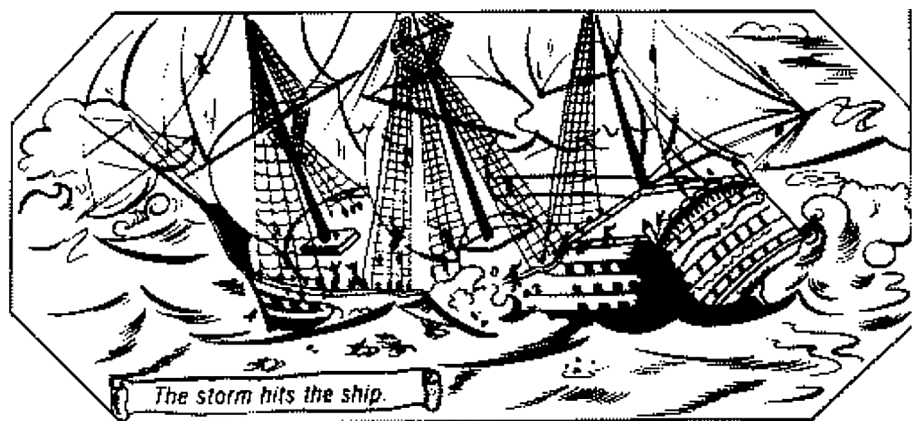


Figure 2.

In comics the signification process can be much more complex. Roger Sabin observes that:

Words and pictures do not have to refer to the same thing, and creators can play with juxtaposition to create a variety of dramatic modes ... the permutation of [words and pictures] are almost endless - limited only by the imaginations of the creators

(Sabin, 1993, p. 9)

Indeed, in comics words and pictures do not normally refer to the same thing but, rather, they contribute different information towards the interpretation of the text.

In the second chapter of the volume II of *Maus* (Fig. 3), the author is portrayed in the present (the end of the Eighties), and the story becomes a meta-story. The title of this chapter is "AUSCHWITZ (time flies)", where "time flies" is syntactically ambiguous. One possibility is that "time" is a noun and the subject of the verb "flies", in which case the title is a very common metaphorical expression. Indeed, the first few panels of the chapter show Art Spiegelman who, while at his drawing table, reflects upon some events in his parents' lives and puts them

Time flies...



Figure 3.

in a parallel comparison with the present times. The quick succession of dates and events, which are forty years apart, conveys the idea of the time that flies.

The second possibility is that “time” is an attribute of the noun “flies”, in which case the expression finds a justification on the visual plane of the same page. The flies that buzz around the artist come from the past, from his own parents’ past, from the dead bodies that were piled up in huge pits outside the concentration camps and which are now amassed on the floor of his studio. In this sense, they are the flies of time.

Thanks to the inter-relation of words and pictures, both syntactic renderings of the chapter title are explicated in the text. However, the one in which “time” is an attribute of “flies” seems to be preponderant. This interpretation is already indicated in the title page of the chapter by the presence of some flies drawn around the main picture. In fact, after reading the whole chapter, it becomes clearer that the flies that come from the corpses symbolise the constant and very uncomfortable thought of the horrific events his parents went through that keeps tormenting the present life of Art Spiegelman. It is very significant that the last panel of the chapter shows Art using an insecticide to kill the bugs that are “eating [him] alive”.

The pile of corpses in the artist’s studio is foregrounded against the ‘reality’ of the context. Similarly, in the second page of the chapter (Fig. 4), the author is portrayed ‘shrunk’ to the size of a child. This happens in a situation in which he feels particularly helpless, namely when literary critics and film producers overwhelm him with questions and offers that he cannot handle. It is a very original way to portray the image of the pure artist who does not want to be questioned about his work or, worse, to adapt it into a commercial production. This visual representation of the author’s feelings occurs in a book where visual metaphor is a leitmotif.

4. THE METAPHORS AND POSSIBLE WORLDS OF *MAUS*

As mentioned above, the main story is the autobiographical narration of Vladek’s experience immediately before and during his deportation to Auschwitz, which makes *Maus* an historical account, rather than a work of fiction. Yet, its faithfulness to reality seems, at least on a superficial level, to be marred by the partial zoomorphism of



Figure 4.

the characters. People are portrayed with different animal faces according to their nationalities: Jews have faces of mice, Germans of cats, Poles of pigs, Americans of dogs, and so on. Technically, this represents a problem of classification: is *Maus* a fictional or non-fictional work?

Yet, the undoubted reality of Vladek's account is not enough for the problem to be dismissed. In this respect it is useful to take into account a semiotic analysis (Trifonas, 1998) of *Effie*, a picture book in

which the characters are insects who have some human faculties, like, for example, the ability to speak. In his article Trifonas states that:

...the reader is alerted to the fact that the story is fictional and not realistic, since ants do not possess the human faculty of speech and it is extremely doubtful that in the history of the world there has ever existed an ant named Effie with anthropomorphic features of the kind objectified in the visual text.

(1998, p. 9)

Strictly speaking, the same statement could be applied to *Maus*. It becomes evident how this poses a very serious problem: the fact that people with animal faces never existed in the history of the world could justify statements against the non-fictional nature of the story, and, by extension, even against the historicity of the Holocaust. Consequently, Spiegelman's stylistic choice merits a very attentive analysis. Trifonas' article itself indicates the theoretical basis for such an analysis. First of all, he claims that:

...semiotics offers a highly developed epistemological, theoretical, and methodological framework for 'deconstructing' the structure of lexical (and visual) signs embodied within picture books as communicative sign systems or codes that function to convey meaning, thus affording the researcher the opportunity to examine the total text as a medium for exchanging and disseminating knowledge.

(1998, p. 3)

So, in order to properly comprehend the information conveyed by the total text it is necessary to deconstruct it into signs and see how the various systems of signs interact with each other. Secondly, another important concept should be considered: that of 'possible worlds'. Umberto Eco (1979) explains that the world created in a novel or in a fairy tale, for example, is a possible world, in that it has certain properties which readers take as parameters for a comparison with the real world; the properties of the real world, in turn, will depend on the encyclopaedia (world knowledge) of each individual reader, who will assess the degree of 'possibility' of the world portrayed in the text (1979, pp. 122-173).

Given these two notions, it is first of all possible to observe that on a macro level, *Maus* is composed of two main codes: language and images. As the analysis of the cover page has already shown, however, these two codes can be dissected into sub-codes, so that, in this

case, the animal faces could be regarded and analysed as a sub-code of the visual code.

Besides, the animal-face sub-code also represents one of the properties of the possible world of *Maus* and, precisely, one that does not match the real world. However, the encyclopedia of the average readership of *Maus* (which is unlikely to include young children) will make it possible to recognise the 'reality' of other such properties as geographical names and historical events. For example, Poland, New York, Auschwitz and Manhattan are all known to exist also in the real world by the average reader, and so are the Second World War and the Nazi regime in Germany.

The concurrent presence of properties that exist in the real world and properties that in the real world do not exist necessarily generates a sense of disbelief in the reader, and it could allow one to liken *Maus* to the picture book *Effie*. But there is a substantial difference. In *Effie*, as Trifonas observes,

...the total text, both lexical and visual, works toward the suspension of disbelief by narcotizing any ideological disjunctions which may be created between extratextual paradigms derived from the reader/viewer's encyclopaedic knowledge and the internal paradigms of the possible world portrayed in the picture book that would impinge upon and mar the vicarious aesthetic experiences promulgated by the artistic text. (1998, p. 9)

In *Maus*, instead, nothing works towards the narcotization of the discrepancies between extratextual and internal paradigms. In the verbal text there are no references to any animal-like feature of the characters. The text as a whole does not contain any element that would attempt to suspend the reader's disbelief about the animal-face property. Everything has a meticulous realistic accuracy (reinforced by the inclusion of maps, diagrams, real photographs and other faithfully reported information) *except* the animal faces. In fact, in *Maus* rather than narcotization there occurs the opposite phenomenon: the coincidence of properties between the possible world of the text and the real world is so regular and precise that, in this sense, the animal-face property represents a deviation from the norm and is therefore foregrounded. Consequently, the animal-face sub-code attracts the reader's attention and calls for an interpretation.

Talking about comics, Walter Moro claims that "One relevant difference between images and writing is that words refer to abstract concepts, whereas images represent a concrete reality" (Moro, 1991, p. 54;

my translation). Such a statement should be taken cautiously. Images do indeed represent concrete realities, but the meaning of 'concrete' and 'reality' can vary greatly depending on the context analysed. In a purely denotative signification, the picture of a mouse face is related to the animal "mouse". In the context of *Maus*, instead, this denotative meaning does not seem to be a valid one, since the characters possess no other features whatsoever to indicate that they are mice; on the contrary, they show all the characteristics of human beings. Therefore, if the denotative meaning is suppressed by the context of the whole text, it is legitimate to believe that there must be connotative meanings as more credible options.

In a connotative signification process there are at least two signifier/signified relationships, where the signified of the first relationship becomes the signifier for the second (Eco, 1976, pp. 55, 85).

Analogously, the animal faces in *Maus*, signify "mouse", "cat", and so on denotatively, but something else connotatively. One particular type of connotative signification is the metaphor, which cognitive linguistics defines as the mapping of one domain onto another domain based on similar semantic characteristics. In the analysis of the cover page I have already mentioned the "cat and mouse" metaphor, so the question is: which characteristics does the domain of cats and mice with the domain of Nazis and Jews? The immediate interpretation is that mice are hunted and killed by cats. Another interpretation arises from the fact that, mice are also generally considered to be a plague that everyone wants to get rid of.

Although on a superficial level it seems to be rather unproblematic, in fact the interpretation of this metaphor can be a controversial one:

In deciding to use mice to represent Jews, Spiegelman gave *Maus* a metaphorical patina of equivocal significance, imparting to the work an ambiguity that threatens to erode its moral underpinnings.

...

The cat-and-mouse metaphor is undeniably a legitimate way of suggesting the power relationship between the Nazis and the Jews... But cats and mice as visual metaphors for the oppressor and the oppressed, well intentioned though the device may be, cannot entirely escape the overtones of playfulness inherent in the "cat-and-mouse game" notion. ... And then there's that notorious propaganda movie produced by the Third Reich in which Jews are depicted as vermin.

(Harvey, 1996, pp. 243-244)

I think that the depiction of Jews as vermin by the Nazi propaganda is in fact the key factor for the interpretation of the metaphor. The animal faces are foregrounded in an otherwise very realistic representation of events, which already invalidates the idea that Spiegelman used “mice to represent Jews”. The characters are *not* mice or cats, but human beings with the faces of mice or cats. This is reinforced when Jews are actually drawn as wearing *masks* of animals (Figs. 3 and 4). Rather than a simple mapping of the cat-and-mouse domain onto the Nazi-and-Jews domain, what seems to me more likely to be happening is a rebuttal of Hitler’s declaration that “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human”. Such a statement is also the epigram of the *Maus*, and the fact that it is echoed in the animal faces of the characters appears to be a mockery of the very racial claims that the Nazis promulgated.

Thus, as a metaphor aimed at rebutting and discrediting Hitler’s own metaphor, the portrayal of animal faces no longer constitutes a threat to the historical validity of *Maus*.

From a stylistic point of view, what is important about this metaphor is the fact that it is realised completely on the visual plane and that it would hardly have been as effective if it had been used in a conventional novel. At the same time, the representation of the animal faces, very stylised and all identical within each “race”, acquires a high degree of symbolicity, very close to that pertaining to verbal communication.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article I have dealt with the issue of the relationship between the verbal and the visual. Such a relationship involves *shared semiotic characteristics* as well as *interaction* between the two modes. This has great semantic importance and calls for more systematic enquiry, especially given the increasingly high proportion of multi-modal texts in the contemporary semiotic landscape.

Furthermore, apart from improving our theoretical knowledge about the complex semantics of word-picture relationships, more research could be devoted to the development of new pedagogical materials which take into account the enormous learning potentials that this area of study offers.

Comics, for example, could be used profitably in a course of introduction to semiotics:

- the notion of sign and of its two aspects: signifier and signified;
- the way in which the signifier *signifies* the signified, i.e. the process of semiosis;
- the way in which different types of semiosis determine different types of signs.

Within this last point it would be particularly interesting to discuss symbolic and iconic signs and the differences/similarities between them. Comparing photographs to stylised drawings of the same subjects, for example, could be a useful way to introduce a notion of icon/symbol scale. Similarly, a comparison between mechanical typeset and hand-written words can help raise awareness of the semantic value of the visuality of writing. The possible pedagogical applications are numerous and worth exploring.

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