

Theological Redemption, Memory, and Mimesis in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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This paper seizes upon Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as a case study and troubles James E. Young's distinction (which he borrows from Saul Friedlander) between redemptive, common memory and nonredemptive deep memory. I outline how a redemptive common memory is essential for posterity to respond to ethical imperatives engendered by the Holocaust, theorized directly by Giorgio Agamben and indirectly by Max Haiven. I articulate this argument in *Maus* as a memoir of mimesis and a work that "shocks" the reader out of preconceived understandings of the Holocaust into symbolically absent and redemptive understandings through its recontextualization of Holocaust images and photographs.

Keywords: Spiegelman, Holocaust, memory, mimesis

1 Introduction

This paper meditates on the relationship between Holocaust memory studies, particularly Holocaust narratives that employ visual elements, and theological philosophy in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Using *Maus* as a case study, I ask how the study of Holocaust memory can benefit from imbuing itself with redemptory potential, while demonstrating how this process unfolds through Spiegelman's comic-book format and his reappropriation of images. James E. Young, after Saul Friedlander, cautions against such a redemptory project because of the fear that it results in an unproductive closure to remembering the Holocaust (666). Following Giorgio Agamben's argument that Jewish Holocaust victims are the example "par excellence" of figures of contemporary social exclusion (179), compelling the imperative to comprehend their struggles as a redemptive, "silent form of resistance" (185), I interrogate Young's position by troubling the distinction (which he borrows from Friedlander) between redemptive, common memory and nonredemptive deep memory.

I begin by outlining Young's argument in light of how "common memory" is conceptualized across disciplines, with Max Haiven delineating how a redemptive common memory of an event is "key to the radical imagination and [as] an emerging site [of] struggle" (62). This move gestures towards the ways in which a redemptive history of an event does not betray deep memory by repressing it, as Young argues (667, 696); instead, it complements an integrated

history of normative, linear narratives, and ambiguous, unrepresentable narratives, speaking to Agamben's imperative by articulating redemption as an open-ended process. Next, I transition into Walter Benjamin's theological philosophy to explicate "redemption" as a struggle against the mythological construction of the concentration camps, thus signaling its transgressive potential. Finally, I outline how this transgressive potential is evident in *Maus* through a dual discussion of Michael Taussig's theory of mimesis and Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory to extend the framework of theological redemption into Holocaust memory studies.

Through this extension, I hope to augment these studies by demonstrating the importance of theological redemption to younger generations — those that have been "[b]orn after Holocaust history" who have no access to first-hand memories of the Holocaust (Young 670). As these generations negotiate their memories of the Holocaust as "a received history of events" (698), i.e., as mediated, mimetic copies of memories, it is essential to explore the ethical imperatives involved so that these generations can keep "the radical imagination" alive. As such, I point towards a link between memory studies and this ethical imperative involving a redemptive history, so that the received histories of the Holocaust can generate ethical meaning through common memory.

2 Common(ing) Memory

In his essay "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past," Young, vis-à-vis Friedlander, distinguishes between common memory and deep memory, as a means of arguing against the possibility of a single memory of the Holocaust claiming an ontological and debilitating primacy. Instead, posterity must practice a kind of integrative memory that accounts for both common and deep memory, allowing narratives and counternarratives of the Holocaust to constantly interact, "generat[ing] a frisson of meaning *in* their exchange, in the working-through process they now mutually reinforce" (668). Young, who aligns common memory with articulable, rational historiography and deep memory with repressed, unrepresentable trauma (666-667), ascribes the former a problematic redemptory status, due to rational historiography's "'coherence'" and its "'closure'" towards history (666). Despite Young's convincing deconstructive argument, in which he states that meaning must be challenged through a "commixture" of different and sometimes conflicting narratives (672), I want to trouble his theoretical premise that a redemptory history of the Holocaust "masks deep memory" (684). Instead, the imperative to comprehend Holocaust struggles as redemptive augments Young's project by enabling postwar generations to acknowledge the processes of mediation in receiving "vicarious" (670) memories

of the Holocaust, thus facilitating a sense of responsibility towards these memories.

Also referencing *Maus* as a case study, Young rightly argues that the comic book's disruption of linear narratives, through its "double-stranded tale of [the] father's [Holocaust] story and his [son's] own recording of it," and its "commixture of words and images" (672), "integrate[s] both narrative and antinarrative elements" (675) and therefore "simultaneously makes and unmakes meaning as it unfolds." Such a commixture establishes itself as a "pointedly antiredemptory medium" (676), gesturing towards an integrated history of both "[t]he historical facts of the Holocaust [and] the fact of their eventual transmission" (678), not redeeming the past by filling it in with meaning, but instead constantly "'keep[ing] watch over absent meaning.'" However, this association of common memory with rational historiography blurs the potentiality of memory conceptualizing the past struggles of Holocaust victims as redemptive, so that these struggles can flash into the present and strike us with a sense of responsibility. In other words, to appreciate the ethical imperatives of these struggles, it is important to comprehend the commixture Young articulates of "past historical events [with] the present conditions under which they are remembered" as being a redemptive process that we are always "commoning."

I am interested in transitioning our conception of "redemption" away from Young's misguided understanding of it as enclosure, and towards an idea of it as signaling the transgressive spirit of the struggles of Holocaust victims living in the present. Haiven theorizes this process as "commoning memory," which is "key to the radical imagination and [as] an emerging site [of] struggle" (62). The radical imagination is the spirit of the past event's "irrenouncible but impossible demand for representation" (74), entangled in "the very 'eventness' of the past." Struggle is the process by which generations who inherit the memories of the past "recall" its eventness. There is an ethical imperative ingrained into these conceptions: "To re-recall how the present came to be through struggle, and to watch for how the past lives on in the present" (67), is to acknowledge the "mediated [...] processes of narration and imagination" (Young 669). It is the eventness of the past, through this integrated history of past and present, that flashes into the present to "'touch'" us (Haiven 81), "instigat[ing]" "struggles" (69) and self-reflective relationships to mediated memories, therefore "demand[ing] a response" from the present (81).

Young cites an example of this process in Spiegelman's treatment of his "mother's lost story" (686). Realizing his father, Vladek, had burned the son's dead mother's memoirs, Artie, the son, mutters "...MURDERER" to himself on his walk home (1:159). Young argues that it consequently "dawns on the son that his entire project may itself be premised on the destruction of his mother's

memoirs, their displacement and violation,” and that *Maus* symbolizes an impossible narrative about the victims whose stories can never be told (686). This silent narrative about Artie’s mother is therefore a negative presence in which silence is not an absence but is a kind of empty presence (687). This example speaks to Haiven’s articulation about the eventness of the past, demanding an “irrenouncible but impossible [...] representation.” The past’s eventness flashes to “touch” us in the present, symbolizing the responsibility postwar generations owe to the deep memory of the past, which “demand[s] representation.”

To Haiven, this is a process of commoning—“memory is not merely personal recollection but a commons: a shared landscape and meeting place that is constantly being reproduced by its visitors.” In this view, “our lives are a site of struggle between the commoning” of unrepresentable memory and the ontological “enclosure of social life” by rational historiography (66). So in a sense, commoning memory is simply another way of conceptualizing Young’s idea of an integrated history between past and present. However, it also challenges Young’s association of common memory with rational historiography, as something that “masks deep memory.” The realm of the common is not *a priori*, in juxtaposition to unknown and inarticulable trauma, coherent and closed, as Young’s logic would imply. Instead, the ethical imperative of responding to the impossible demands of the past already infuse the common realm with this sense of impossible, and therefore, unrepresentable, knowledge. Specifically, we are *already* always engaged in an integrative history, in which the common is a constant site of struggle, an impossible act of striving towards the known and the articulable to do justice to deep memory.

Next, I want to explore how this process is redemptory by discussing Benjamin, through whom I can augment my stance against Young’s theoretical premise. I explicate redemption as “*the coming*” (Haiven 67, emphasis added) of the “impossible but also irrenouncible” demands of the past (68), in which the struggles of Holocaust victims are abstractly redemptory, constantly but impossibly laying claims for representation to the present through their very incomprehension.

3 Redemption

Benjamin wrote in Nazi-occupied Europe, witnessing the Nazi sovereignty rise as a mythological force, with Hitler acting as a divinely ordained leader of sorts. Benjamin located transgressive potential in a radical historical materialism, by which the past is not an unchangeable truth, but rather, that which “flashes up” to strike and redeem us and then “is never seen again” (“Theses” V). This flash is the past’s “irrenouncible but impossible demand for representation” (Haiven 74),

impossible because it is just that, only a flash. When it strikes us, it compels us to act on our responsibility to the present.

Benjamin seizes this idea of impossible representation as the crux for what he means by redemption. He drew from radical Jewish theology, arguing that the past strikes us, like the Messiah, as a “redeemer” (VI) to claim representation, but this striking is a “*weak Messianic power*” (II) because it is always vicarious and impossible, unlike the sense of “closure” that Young ascribes to common memory. Haiven explains that this impossible Messiah is “the coming redemption of past generations’ [hopes] that lie encrypted in the material world” of the present (67). Indeed, commoning memory must be the vocation of Benjamin’s radical historian (68), to interpret the past not as “it really was” but so as to “seize hold of a [redemptive] memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin VI). This is how we draw out an ethical responsibility to the present out of the past, which is how Artie tries to address his mother’s narrative, and the inarticulable gap between this missing narrative and the eventness of the Holocaust.

Agamben references Benjamin’s framework to delineate modern society’s control of its citizens through biopolitics, reducing citizens to their “bare life.” While Haiven does not discuss the Holocaust, Agamben cites it as the example “*par excellence*” of his theory. The ethical imperative we must draw from the Holocaust is to seize hold of redemptory acts of incoherence that are bound up in it, commoning our memory in spaces of indistinction, therefore striking outside of the mythological comprehension framework of the sovereign power, such as the SS and their control of the concentration camps. Only in these thresholds of uncertainty is it possible ethically “to rethink the political space” (Agamben 187) and pose a “threat” to the rational historiography of the concentration “camp” (185).

This concept of ethical redemption through an integrative memory is admittedly complex. How exactly does it work? In his essay “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin outlines that a sovereign state is based on a sanctioned violence “crowned by fate.” It is fatalistic because it is mythological—Nazism established itself as a mythological power that made decisions over life and death; Hitler was a god and the SS were his clergymen.¹ This divinely sanctioned

¹ Agamben clarifies this argument that Hitler was a metaphorical god in the context of biopolitics: “[T]he Führer in the Third Reich [...] represents the unity and equality of stock in the German people. His is not a despot’s or a dictator’s authority, which is imposed on the will and the persons of the subjects from outside. His power is, rather, all the more unlimited insofar as he is identified with the very biological life of the German people. By virtue of this identity, his every word is immediately law [...], and he recognizes himself immediately in his own command” (184).

violence decides over bare life, making divine decisions “over life and death itself” (286). Incomprehensible narratives about the Holocaust, such as Artie’s impossible attempt to understand his mother’s missing narrative and his difficulty in conveying the Holocaust, as evidenced by his conversation with his psychiatrist (2:45),² are “silent form[s] of resistance” because they redemptively operate outside of the comprehension framework of the Holocaust. To summarize it very simply in the context of the Holocaust: As a mythological power, the SS reduced Holocaust victims to their bare life, administering them biopolitically and making sovereign decisions “over life and death itself.” This very methodical, divine-like power relied upon a comprehension framework premised on laws—not political laws, but the abstract concept of theological law that asserts Nazism as a mythological power. This is why I understand incomprehensible narratives about the Holocaust as redemptive; by the very nature of their *incomprehension*, they “strike” outside of the *comprehension* framework imbued in the mythological laws of the Holocaust itself, and I theorize this process operating today through mimesis, the means by which postwar generations engage in a redemptive, integrative memory of the Holocaust.

4 Mimesis

I imbue Benjamin’s idea of redemptory struggle into Young’s theory of integrative memory through mimesis, by the very notion that postwar generations mediate their relationship to the Holocaust through “a received history of events”: passed-down, mimetic copies of memories. In this sense, works such as *Maus* are an imperfect mimesis, addressing the ethical imperatives of the past’s demands for representation through, in the case of *Maus*, visual mimesis that impossibly “reanimate[s]” the past by “undoing [its] finality” (Hirsch 115) to ethically “reassert” present relations (114)—a process we also see at work in Hirsch’s concept of postmemory.

² Overwhelmed by the enormity of his project, Artie speaks to his psychiatrist Pavel, and their conversation exemplifies the difficulty in “writ[ing] the stories of the dead without filling in their absence,” gesturing towards the idea of silence as empty presence that Young theorizes (687). Artie ponders, “Samuel Beckett once said: ‘Every word is like an unnecessary strain on silence and nothingness,’” followed by Pavel’s response, “Yes.” Then Spiegelman presents us with a rare panel in the comic without dialogue; the two men just sit together in silence, “a moment in the therapeutic context as fraught with significance as narrative itself [by which] silence [...] actively passes between two people” (Young 686-687)—a kind of “active,” dialectical commoning of memory. Artie then concludes, “On the other hand, he SAID it,” pointing towards the irrenouncibility of the nevertheless impossible demands of these words, the absent narratives from the past.

I want to be very clear with my articulation of mimesis to avoid any ambiguity. I adopt Taussig's understanding of mimesis, in which he himself sought to rescue it from an oversaturated conception by which merely anything could be interpreted as mimetic, thus deflating the mimetic faculty's transgressive potential.³ By this logic, works of memoir or other genres and articulations of direct memories do not necessarily possess the transgressive potential that Taussig has in mind. He is more specific, focusing instead on visual mimesis that is more easily distinguishable as an unfaithful copy. These mimetic works "'capture'" the "*power*" of the original (62) through its "refetishiz[ation]" (23). This refetishizing is imperfection—in other words, by *not* being a faithful copy but instead being a "'poorly executed ideogram,'" "imperfect" (17) copies seize upon the original's "sensuous sense of the real" (16), illuminating "the discovery of an optical unconscious" (23) in the original. This process is an act of "transgression" (85) "to access the sacred[ness]" of the original (86), "opening up new possibilities for exploring reality and providing means for changing culture and society along with these possibilities" (23). If we contextualize this understanding through Benjamin's notion of mimesis, by which imperfect visual mimesis generates a redemptory flash, creating an "opening up of the *optical unconscious*" (24)—our very bodily epistemologies, what Taussig calls "[c]orporeal understanding[s]," are "hit" by the enormity of the copy's imperfection or incomprehension (30). We reorient ourselves to the sacred, mythological power of the original, transgressing this power and responding to the impossible demands of the past to ethically restructure our reality.

I value that this summary of Taussig's theory is sparse, but the theory becomes more accessible when we apply it to postmemory and *Maus*. In this vein, Spiegelman's visually playful animalization of his characters and his reappropriation of images redemptively "refetishize[s]" (Taussig 23) and "shock[s]" us (Hirsch 116) out of our familiar understandings of the Holocaust, "'captur[ing]'" the "*power*" (Taussig 62) of that which they are copies, thereby conveying the "absence and loss" of Holocaust narratives (Hirsch 119) to speak to the ethical demands of impossibly representing these narratives.

For Hirsch, postmemory is the postwar generations' mediated adoptions of direct memories that "*seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (107), not literally but through "affective force" (109). This notion of affect is essential, as it ties postmemory to Taussig's redemptively transgressive notion of mimesis.

³ Taussig clarifies that this problem of mimesis results from the rise of postmodernism, which "has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice"—that *everything* is mimetic and nothing more than mimetic (xv). However, this "'literary' turn in the social sciences [...] yields naught else but more meta-commentary in place of poesis" (xvi-xvii).

Just as imperfect mimesis for Taussig “hit[s]” our “[c]orporeal” epistemologies, the power of mimesis for Hirsch “reinforce[s] the *living* connection between past and present,” (125)—“*reactivat[ing]* and *reembody[ing]*” original images (111) to “shock” us in the present (116) with a “presence of embodied experience” (111).

To take concrete examples from *Maus*, Hirsch notes that Spiegelman’s drawing of human characters as animals arguably depicts a “fractured” and “severed,” or, imperfect, sense of the spirit of an original idea, in this case, “family, safety, and continuity” (116). Likewise, Young explains how Spiegelman’s mimetic use of mice allows him to “tell [his family’s] story and not tell it at the same time” (687). Hirsch cites Spiegelman’s earlier, shorter version of *Maus*, “The First Maus,” in which Spiegelman “refetishizes” an original image, a famous photograph of liberated Holocaust prisoners standing behind a barbwire fence, as mice, with an arrow pointing to one mouse labeled as “Poppa.” This intentional refetishization, according to Hirsch, “reactivate[s] and reembody[ies] a ‘cultural/archival’ image whose subjects are [otherwise] anonymous” (112), by which Spiegelman engages in commoning memory, in the sense that he is enacting “an emerging site [of] struggle” (Haiven 62) to, in Young’s words, “tell [his family’s] story and not tell it at the same time,” thereby practicing an ethical, integrative memory. In all of these examples, consciously mimetic recontextualizations access the past’s impossible demand for representation, responding to it as an ethical imperative by acknowledging its irrenouncibility. It is a process of “affective contagion” by which we “reembody” the past into the present (Hirsch 116)—redemptively, because it impossibly strikes beyond the mythological comprehension framework of rational historiography, what Hirsch calls “an *aura* of indexicality” (122).

5 Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have attempted to correct Young’s idea of integrative memory by arguing that his antiredemptory theoretical premise is misguided. Instead, Holocaust memory studies need to be imbued with redemptory potential for integrative memory to effectively respond to the ethical imperatives of Holocaust narratives. Through Haiven’s concept of commoning memory, I have explained that integrative memory always already unfolds in the common realm by which it addresses the past event’s “irrenouncible but impossible demand for representation” (74). In the context of Benjamin’s theology, this deconstructive hybrid of irrenouncibility and impossibility is redemptive because these demands are a “*weak Messianic*” (“Theses” II) “coming” (Haiven 67) that strike, as Agamben and Benjamin indicate, outside of the Holocaust’s mythological

comprehension framework. I cite this redemptive integrative memory in Spiegelman's *Maus* through Hirsch's arguments about mimesis in postmemory within the theoretical framework that Taussig articulates. Through active, visual refetishizations of Holocaust narratives in *Maus*, such as Spiegelman's use of animals and his recontextualizations of images, *Maus* engages in an integrative memory of impossibly responding to Artie's family's irrenouncible demands for representation, creating "an embodied 'living connection'" between the past and present (Hirsch 111), thus redemptively "transgressi[ng]" (Taussig 85) the mythological "*power*" (62) of the rational historiography surrounding the Holocaust.

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