Teaching Comics:
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Samantha Baskind

In various courses, including Twentieth-Century Art, Art and the Holocaust, and American Jewish Art and Culture, I assign graphic novels to my students. These include Art Spiegelman's seminal *Maus* (1986, 1991), Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006), and Joe Kubert's *Yossel* (2003). Long before the students are asked to be prepared for a class discussion about a graphic novel I spend class time preparing them how to "read" one, which in my course, considering I am an art historian, is first how to read the imagery. I impress on the students that the art is not and cannot be tangential, merely acting as an illustration. Indeed, this early teaching session focuses on the visuals because I want to emphasize the importance of these vital components and make students aware of them. Students know how to read a written narrative – for the most part. My job is to teach them how to read the visual narrative in sequential art and otherwise.

I begin by familiarizing students with the vocabulary of comics, attuning them to a visual language of fonts, gutters, panel sizes and shapes, speech bubbles, color, and style (expressionistic, clean lines, etc), to name some crucial elements. I have found Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* to be most helpful for illustrating, literally, and explaining how comics work and the attendant terminology (McCloud uses comics to explicate comics). Here are two pages from McCloud's book (show figs.). The page on the left demonstrates three different ways that action can be drawn – and when showing this page to my students I use the vocabulary of comics I briefly mentioned

above. That is to say, I explain that the page is made up of three panels, a long horizontal one atop and two smaller rectangular panels at the bottom. As a side note – some graphic novels are conceived with open and sprawling pages, without frames. We also talk about the clean lines that McCloud favors and his use of black and white versus color. As you can see, this particular page addresses a few ways that comic artists convey action: through lines, multiple images, and streaking. Note, too, McCloud's use of bold print for emphasis.

On the right McCloud demonstrates closure, which, as he puts it, is the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." That is to say, readers create closure. Readers actively participate with comics by filling in the gaps of narrative between panels. Comics require the reader's interaction as opposed to film, for example, which seamlessly connects action by virtue of the medium itself.

Time constraints do not permit further description of the language of comics but, in brief, I also stress looking at the individual design elements, in other words the formal qualities of the art, such as composition (the arrangement of the work's parts), line, texture, scale, proportion, balance, contrast, and rhythm. I want my students to understand how an artist arranges and uses these various features and to be able to translate what they see into words. I help students to think of a comic as a series of decisions that an artist made. After learning how comics work, students no longer passively accept what they see, but rather parse the visuals. Their job is then to figure out and describe, explain, and interpret those decisions -- and especially to evaluate how effectively a graphic novelist tells a story through a marriage of word and image.

Let's turn now to a few pages from Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, published in two

volumes (one in 1986 and the second in 1991; show figs.) to see how I put this approach into action. For those of you not familiar with the book, *Maus* relays Vladek Spiegelman's, Art Spiegelman's father, experiences in Polish ghettos and camps during the Holocaust. Interspersed are present-day images of Vladek narrating the story to his son, along with Art Spiegelman's digressions about creating *Maus*. Spiegelman's efforts to share his father's tale are intertwined with his own attempts to make sense of the legacy of the story for his own life. This multi-layered story, connecting the past and the present, and showing how the past continues to exist in the present, is enhanced by the graphic novel medium. Certainly, levels of meaning are communicated in prose accounts, but a single page of a graphic novel allows several stories to be offered simultaneously; the reader can see, in multiple panels on one page, a variety of perspectives at almost the same moment. To be sure, Spiegelman shows rather than only tells the intertwined components of his story in tandem, which convey a sense of action and emotion through a combination of the visual and the written word.

The visuals provide commentary on their own, as well. Take, for instance, page 125 in volume one of *Maus*, which cuts in and out of the past and present. This complex presentation portrays Vladek and his wife Anja preparing to escape a bunker where they were hiding in Poland and then leaving their tentative refuge and realizing that they have nowhere to go. On the same page, Vladek, back in the present and at a bank in America, requests a key to his safety deposit box for his son in the final panel. Vladek explains his motive in the first panel on the subsequent page in a conversation with Art: "In case anything bad happens to me you must run **right away** over here" (126). Undeniably, this sentiment connects to the elder Spiegelman's Holocaust experience –

evocatively depicted by the ominous swastika path that he and Anja traveled on just a few panels earlier – considering Vladek still does not feel safe even if he has lived in America for decades. A reader focused only on the written narrative would read the words on the page and passively look at the imagery, seeing the pictures as only illustrations rather than a series of forms essential to the story's content.

To that end, let's flesh out how the visuals work (show detail of figs.). On page 125 there are seven panels of various sizes. I ask my students how do those sizes enhance the story? Once attuned to this comics technique, students invariably zero in on the largest panel on the page, highly vertical to stress Spiegelman's point, at the left, bottom corner (see the detail on the right). A tiny Vladek and Anja are seen from overhead, walking hand in hand down a forked road. The forks point in four different directions, creating the shape of a swastika, which emphasizes their conundrum: no matter what direction they choose to go, the Nazis – and danger – will be waiting. At the top of the panel is a caption, rather than a speech bubble, recording Vladek's remark, conveyed in his Polish inflection, "Anja and I didn't have where to go." At the bottom of this panel, Vladek's recollection reinforces the couple's dilemma, in another caption: "We walked in the direction of Sosnowiec- **but where to go?!**" Notice the bold lettering to highlight Art's parents' predicament. The harrowing perspective employed by Spiegelman accentuates his parents' vulnerability as does the panel's verticality and his parents' small size, further punctuated by the fact that they are dwarfed by the swastika. Moreover, Spiegelman depicts his parents in dark silhouette, which underscores the literal and figural darkness enveloping them. Around the pair, leafless, bare trees indicate the season, but the trees also symbolize lifelessness. Smoke from an industrial

building on the far right shows that life goes on for some individuals, but also foretells the gas chamber, which awaits others, including the Spiegelmans if they cannot find refuge. The arrangement of this panel actually communicates more through the visuals than through words, yet both most certainly complement the other.

My class also examines the gutters and what lies between them, within the empty spaces, the silences. Here students consider the idea of closure, illustrated earlier by McCloud. At the top of the *Maus* page the Spiegelmans decide to leave their bunker in panel one and they have already departed in panel two. What happened between these two panels? Likely more conversation about when exactly to leave, packing of whatever meager belongings they still have, fear at what lies ahead, and the donning of their "Polish" disguises – all of which occur in the imagination of the reader. That is closure.

Other questions I ask include: Does the art or words/dialogue drive the story or page -- or do both work in tandem? This is sequential art after all. What is the relationship between content and form? How do the visuals move the story forward? In short, what do you see? The key here is that all of the visuals serve the story. Nothing one sees is incidental. Nothing is mere illustration. Here I am projecting the sort of study guide I hand out to my students before they read *Maus* (show fig.). Note that these questions are not about the historical details of *Maus*, which is dealt with in depth in class as well – also with a set of study questions – but about how the art conveys the story, often jointly with the written component.

Other elements discussed include the speech bubbles and their shapes, as well as the captions outside of speech bubbles, mentioned a few moments ago. I ask how

does Spiegelman's bestiary work - - or not work? What can you say about non-verbal communication, like posture, gesture, and expression? I try to impress on my students that if you take the words away you will still understand the story – that the impact of *Maus* will still be there. If you take the visuals away you will be lost.

END BY PUTTING UP SLIDE OF SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY, WITH A FEW COMMENTS TO FLESH OUT.