

The Health of the Nation in the Shadow of Modern Historical Trauma: Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the representation of the American national trauma of 9/11 in Art Spiegelman's comic book/graphic novel In the Shadow of No Towers. Although it points out analogies with Spiegelman's graphic novel Maus, it sees In the Shadow of No Towers as a unique artistic work whose difference from Maus is determined by the author's direct experience of the traumatic event. The paper discusses the most important symbols in the book, such as the recurrent image of the glowing Tower, the motif of falling men, and smoke. The paper emphasizes the strong anti-Bush tone of Spiegelman's work, which rejects the official presentation of 9/11 as serving the purposes of political and ideological propaganda. It shows how the traumatic event of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center is transformed into narrative memory, the result of the author's therapeutic acting out of the historical trauma. An important part of this paper is an exploration of the visual presentation of the globally witnessed tragic event and the function of Spiegelman's incorporation of classic cartoons and comic strip characters into his book, indicating the artist's elaborate work with intertextuality.

Keywords: trauma, 9/11, Art Spiegelman, comics, memory, national symbols, G. W. Bush, nationalism, health, therapy

It is evident that the health of the nation is determined not only by the physical condition of its citizens but also by their mind or spirit. This paper sets out to explore the psychological aspects of the nation's health as represented in American literature. The spirit of the American nation has been marked by numerous national traumas ranging from the genocide of Native Americans and the existence of slavery, through the fratricidal Civil War, to the involvement of American soldiers in military conflicts outside the United States. In

the 20th century alone, Americans witnessed such traumatic events as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent internment of Japanese Americans in camps, the participation of American soldiers in both World Wars and armed conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan, the assassination of President J. F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and numerous domestic racial conflicts. To narrow our scope, we will concentrate on a modern historical trauma that happened at the beginning of the 21st century and that came to be called 9/11. This paper deals with the terrorist attack as represented in Art Spiegelman's book *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

The power of Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus* (1986, 1991) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) consists in his ability to present historical trauma through the prism of family history, to link horrifying public events with his most intimate world. Both books address terrible events that resulted in the deaths of numerous innocent victims, although the magnitudes of the catastrophes are incomparable. Whereas *Maus* deals with the Holocaust and its tragic effects on Spiegelman's family, the subject of *In the Shadow of No Towers* (further referred as *No Towers*) is the terrorist attack on the buildings of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. In a way, *No Towers* can be approached as a loose sequel to *Maus* because, as Avid Hajdu says in *The New York Times Book Review*, "Spiegelman clearly sees Sept. 11 as his Holocaust (or the nearest thing his generation will have to personal experience with anything remotely correlative" (13). Kristiaan Versluys rightly sees the link of *No Towers* with *Maus* even in its title, since "[t]he children of Holocaust survivors often refer to themselves or are referred to as living *in the shadow* of the tragedy their parents were part of" (52, emphasis mine).

Yet in many aspects, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, "a meditation on traumatic seeing" (Hirsch, "Editor's Column" 1213), is a different book. Unlike the Holocaust, 9/11 became a globally witnessed event and thus more visible to the public, which in Katalin Orbán's view has influenced "the different visual strategies of the two books... So in *Maus* the work's main concern is how not to overwrite another visual archive of its subject; in *No Towers*, it is how not to be overwritten by it" (60). An even more important difference between the both books is the fact that the narrator-protagonist Art Spiegelman, as a resident of SoHo, the Lower Manhattan quarter close to the Twin Towers, was a direct witness to the terrorist attack, and though he did not see the first plane hit the tower, "they [together with his wife Françoise] *heard* the crash behind them while heading North" and he saw "the face of a woman heading South" (2), which is pictured with a terrified expression. In *Maus*, the Holocaust is mediated by Art's father Vladek, who in a series of interviews with his son tells the story of his survival of Nazi genocide. It is Vladek's experience, not Art's, and even if he appropriates his father's trauma and in some parts identifies with it (to such an extent that he has fantasies about Zyklon B coming out from the shower of his parents' bathroom) (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 16), he can only *imagine* all the horrific situations that his father and his mother Anja experienced. Contrary to *Maus*, in *No Towers* his senses are fully employed at the moment of the initial shock: he can *see* frightened people running chaotically through the streets, *hear* the roar of planes, *smell* the smoke of the burning towers.

On the other hand, we should bear in mind that *Maus* also presents Art's personal trauma. His experience illustrates the concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma. He inherits his parents' history so intensely that it shapes his own identity.

This internalization of the parents' or even grandparents' traumatic past is typical of the descendants of Holocaust survivors. In connection with the intergenerational transmission of trauma we can apply Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to Art's response to his parents' original trauma. According to Hirsch, this "postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated." It is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22). Postmemory reflects the level of identification with the original recipients of trauma and is often characterized by the feeling of displacement, living in temporal and spatial exile, estrangement, and the experience of loss and absence which frequently leads to an identity crisis. Moreover, *Maus I* contains Art Spiegelman's genuine personal trauma in the comic-book insert "Prisoner on the Hell Planet", which records the artist's feelings of guilt after his family tragedy when his mother Anja committed suicide in 1968. The expressionistic graphic recreation of this personal trauma contrasts with Spiegelman's minimalistic presentation of the historical trauma of the Holocaust as the manifestation of his distance from the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, the experience of which was only mediated to him.

In the graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*, the traumatic repetition compulsion is manifested by the recurrent image of the glowing Tower. This image appears on each of the ten plates or pages which reflect Spiegelman's response to the terrorist attack; in fact the Twin Towers on the cover of his oversized book symbolize the national trauma experienced by Americans in September 2001. The fact that the burning tower introduces most plates in Spiegelman's book confirms the centrality of this image. The recurrence of this image corresponds to the obsessive nature of traumatic recollections. The narrator emotionally acts out the scene of the attack on the tower as if it were happening all over again. Thus he uses the present tense, which corresponds to Ruth Leys's assertion that "[t]he experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated traumatic present" (2). Moreover, in William Sargant's view, it may become a very important part of the curative 'present-tense' abreaction (Leys 201). As individual panels indicate, Spiegelman is fully possessed by the image of the incandescent tower before it collapses into itself. He sees the tower as "awesome" and has an apocalyptic vision because, as he confesses, at the moment of the tower's collapse "it felt like the world was ending" (2). Although he admits that he "never loved those arrogant boxes" (ibid), he feels the loss to which he responds with a certain nostalgic melancholia as a form of acting out. In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra points to Sigmund Freud, who "saw melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object" (65-66). This possession by personal and collective history pervades the narrator's mind. In the fourth plate, Spiegelman, referring to himself in the third person (a manifestation of the crisis of his identity), concedes that he is trapped by the traumas of September 11, 2001, which he is incessantly reliving, and admits that "his memories swirl and events fade, but he still sees that glowing tower when he closes his eyes" (4).

Although Art suggests that he was more a “rootless cosmopolitan” (4) than a strong patriot before 9/11, the loss of the Twin Towers has become painful for him since he has obviously developed an affection for New York City. He knows he cannot be indifferent to the familiar streets of his home SoHo, and he is aware of his inability to leave his beloved city. Thus he calls himself a “rooted cosmopolitan” after the terrorist attack, suggesting his emotional attachment to the locale. Furthermore, his personal trauma helps him to empathize with the historical trauma of his Jewish ancestors when he says: “I finally understand why some Jews didn’t leave Berlin right after Kristallnacht!” (4).

However, there is another image that is symbolically associated with the 9/11 tragedy—the image of falling men. The prominence of this image is reinforced on the back cover of Spiegelman’s book which shows a variety of people and comic-book figures falling in different positions. Here it is worth mentioning that the famous photograph of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center plays an important role in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and also gave the title to Don DeLillo’s book on the tragic events of 9/11. The image of the falling bodies of people who jumped in despair from the Tower to avoid death in fire and smoke is embedded in Art’s mind, as he says in one of his panels: “He [Art Spiegelman] saw the falling bodies on TV much later... but what he *actually* saw got seared into his skull forever” (4). Further he openly alludes to the photograph taken by the Associated Press photographer Richard Drew when he describes himself as “haunted now by the images he didn’t witness... images of people tumbling to the streets below... especially one man (according to a neighbor) who executed a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act” (6). The photograph aroused controversial reaction; on the one hand it was much praised for its aesthetic qualities, on the other it was criticized from the ethical point of view. Spiegelman was aware of this controversy, and this was the reason why he pictured the SoHo street with voyeuristic paparazzi who are immune to the tragedies of dying people and are attracted only to its sensational aspects. In one panel he drew a street artist for whom the crumbling towers are just a model which he is painting without excitement.

From *Maus* we know that Spiegelman has a liking for graphic and verbal puns, and this is also evident in *No Towers*. To introduce the motif of the fall, he inserted an old comic strip “Etymological Vaudeville”—which humorously plays with the English idiom “dropping the other shoe” or “waiting for the other shoe to drop” in the meaning of waiting for something bad to happen. He pictures this idiomatic expression in its literal visual form as a giant shoe falling on the crowd of terrified New Yorkers. This graphic motif recurs in the last plate, which underscores the circular composition of Spiegelman’s book. However, this panel depicts a different time, the second anniversary of the 9/11 attack in 2003. Now the crowd of New Yorkers, in the form of comic-book figures including mice,



Richard Drew: Falling Man. http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALINGMAN

is endangered by the cowboy boots falling on their heads at Ground Zero. This is an overt reference to the George W. Bush administration and the forthcoming elections, in which “Tragedy is transformed into Travesty” (10).

Although two years after the tragedy New Yorkers seem to have returned to normal and “to have picked up the rhythms of daily life” (9), Art exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, suffering from insomnia and anxiety. In one picture he wakes up having the impression that “the sky is falling” (9), which indicates the end of the world. He also confronts the banal atmosphere of an ordinary party held in Tribeca a few days before the events of 9/11 with the depressing reality after the terrorist attack, imbued with the feeling of displacement. Nothing has order here, everything is topsy-turvy. Spiegelman graphically represents this feeling through the dislocation of various items that have replaced the artist’s head. Instead of his head he has a lampshade, the head of his cat, his hand grasping a cigarette, a shoe and a mask of a mouse, one of the numerous allusions to his previous graphic book, underlining the connection of the inherited trauma of the Holocaust with the present trauma of 9/11. The displacement is also expressed by the removal of the Statue of Liberty from its pedestal in the presence of Uncle Sam, who has the look of George W. Bush. Art is unable to distinguish his neurotic depression from well-founded despair that stems from his awareness of the repetition of historical mistakes; the tragedy of the destruction of the World Trade Center has its roots in “the twin towers of Auschwitz and Hiroshima” (8). Being overwhelmed with loss, he feels like an “obsessive and paranoid monkey” (ibid) and experiences paranoia and alienation from himself. His awareness of loss is enormous and comprises the loss of the previous lifestyle, certainties and of his faith in the United States, symbolically expressed by the loss of a cigarette.

Another recurrent motif in *No Towers* is smoke. Again the reader can register the connection of this book with *Maus* in the captions where Art, pictured as a mouse, remembers his father Vladek who tried to describe to him the smell of the smoke in Auschwitz. According to Art, “the closest he got was telling me it was... ‘indescribable’ ” (3). He comes to the conclusion that this is exactly the word for his experience of the air in Lower Manhattan after the attack on the World Trade Center. The parallel between Auschwitz and 9/11 acquires an ironic meaning when Spiegelman pictures himself with a cigarette from which grey smoke is emanating. In addition he inserts an old Mars Attacks card published by TOPPS GUM, Inc. showing the building of Congress in Washington, DC in flames. Ironically this card anticipates the attack on the Pentagon on 9/11. The representation of Art as a mouse indicates that in the rendition of his traumatic memory, he takes over the role of Vladek. In Orbán’s view, “the unrepresentable smell draws attention to traumatic memory as both close and out of reach, far from the father’s failing powers of description, but close to somatic experience... and it exceeds the powers of description offered in either book. This connection between the two events and stories marks both crises as cases of traumatic memory in a multigenerational chain of remembering, transmission, and reenactment anchored in the body” (58).

Since the terrorist attack in September 2001 has become a national trauma for America, it is not surprising that Spiegelman employs various national symbols—which, however, acquire ironic meanings. The use of irony enabled Spiegelman to convey his critical distance from the official presentation of 9/11. For him, American political propaganda after the tragedy was “nothing less than a betrayal of the true meaning of 9/11” (Versluys

50). Although in the introduction to *No Towers*, he claims that he has never wanted to be a political cartoonist because of the transience of political caricature, his distaste for the machinery of government made his graphic novel highly politicized. In his view, “brigands suffering from war fever have... *hijacked* ” (4) the tragic events of 9/11, and he feels “equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own government” (2). A bald eagle with spread-out wings carrying George W. Bush and Dick Cheney makes it clear whom Spiegelman means by these “brigands”. This national symbol of the United States appears already in the 2nd chapter which shows Spiegelman wearing the eagle around his neck, an apparent allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Art, tormented by the destruction of the terrorist act which can be compared to a modern curse, is, similarly to the ancient mariner, doomed to loneliness in his fierce effort to tell the story of 9/11, however his acting out of the trauma meets with unconcern. He has the compulsive idea that the sky is falling, which he ascribes to his post-traumatic stress disorder. He depicts himself as a broken man who has lost his sense of reason. Above his head there is a poster announcing that Spiegelman’s brain lost in Lower Manhattan is missing. Its shape resembles the smoke of the Tower.

Spiegelman’s irony also ridicules an enormous wave of nationalism, in his eyes jingoism, which is symbolized by the image of the American flag. The stars and stripes, a symbol of the unity of the American people, is perceived as a war banner. In Spiegelman’s *No Towers*, the American nation after the 2000 election is divided by color (blue Democrats, red Republicans). The author documents this division by statistical data and the red-blue map of the USA. Overall the whole graphic novel expresses a distinctive anti-Bush message stemming from the way in which George W. Bush came to power. Spiegelman plays with colors to capture the atmosphere of fear, accompanied by various degrees of terrorist attack alert.

The critique of the political situation in the United States finds its visual presentation in the captions where the world is pictured upside down. Spiegelman was obviously inspired by the old classic comics “The Upside Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo” by Gustav Verbeck, where the first half of the strips becomes the second half after turning the page round by 180 degrees. The author here depicts a campaign against Iraq led by a cowboy, another allusion to the American president of that time, George W. Bush. Spiegelman refuses to participate in the national euphoria over the dubious victory in the war in Iraq and ironizes this nationalism through a parody of the classic Frederick Burr Opper comic strip “Happy Hooligan”. In Spiegelman’s rendition, however, we see a “hapless hooligan”, a misfit who is interviewed by the mass media trying to get his answers confirming the uniqueness and exceptionality of America. A “hapless hooligan” subverts all these patriotic myths instead, and his answers are so “un-American” that he must be kicked away in the last frame of this comic strip. Furthermore, Spiegelman points out the commodification of 9/11 showing the sale of kitsch connected with the tragic events. An analogous motif also appears in *Maus II* where the author criticizes the commercialization of the Holocaust, or what Norman G. Finkelstein named “the Holocaust industry”, in the scene in which a businessman is showing an advertisement for a *Maus* vest.

In *No Towers*, Spiegelman presents America as a sick country, and he himself feels like a patient who suffers from paranoia and depression. However, his acting out of the New York tragedy in the form of comic testimony is the first step to restoring his health, which

has undoubtedly therapeutic effects. It transforms the artist's trauma into a narrative memory "that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past" (Caruth 153). The fragmentary character of his graphic novel is determined by the inaccessibility of the original trauma and mirrors "the author's scrambled state of mind" (Versluys 64). However, Spiegelman's ironic stance testifies to his distance from the traumatic past and present reality, which is a necessary precondition of another stage of a healing process—working through. Frequent allusions and the use of intertextuality support this ironic stance. For example in the 10th chapter, the author alludes to W. H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939", whose verse "The unmentionable odour of death offends the September night" (10) acquires new, unexpected connotations in the context of *No Towers*.

Considering Spiegelman's artistic orientation, it is understandable that his graphic novel contains most frequent references to comic books. They serve as a source of escape from traumatic reality and function as therapy in the healing process of his wounded psyche. As Art says, "Right after 9/11/01, while waiting for some other terrorist shoe to drop, many found comfort in poetry. Others searched for solace in old newspaper comics" (10). Spiegelman even includes a special appendix, "The Comic Supplement", in his book; the appendix provides a useful overview of the history of comics published in Sunday newspaper supplements at the turn of the 19th century, particularly in the newspapers of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. By happenstance, the journalistic competition between these "twin titans of modern journalism" took place in close vicinity of Ground Zero, so Spiegelman revived "the ghosts of some Sunday Supplement stars born on nearby Park Row about a century earlier" (8) like the Yellow Kid, Little Nemo, Maggie and Jiggs from *Bringing Up Father*, or, last but not least, Crazy Kat.

The comic strips helped the pessimistic Spiegelman, who saw "glasses as half empty rather than half full" (8), to ease his mental health problems after the trauma of 9/11. It results from his need to return to old values that compensate for the loss of certainties and faith. In the introduction to "The Comic Supplement" he clarifies his escapism as follows: "The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the 20th century" (*In the Shadow*, "The Comic Supplement", unpagged).

More importantly, in these comic strips that were supposed to have a short life Spiegelman finds surprising parallels with the 9/11 events. For example in George McManus's *Bringing Up Father*, Jiggs has a panic fear of the collapse of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the selected part of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* depicts his heroes climbing down the New York skyscrapers, reminding us of the vain efforts of people trapped in the World Trade Center to save their lives by descending the towers. As has been said already, Spiegelman also incorporates these old cartoon figures into his own story of 9/11 or creates his own versions of the classic comic strips, setting them in a new context. This is the case with the already mentioned "A Hapless Hooligan", which appears on a page where the panels are graphically arranged in the shape of the twin towers. Furthermore, Versluys characterizes the introduction of old cartoon characters as a distancing device and as "an expression of the city's unquenchable high spirits. They stand for the raucousness and rebelliousness of the New Yorker. They embody the vernacular

protest against self-important official rhetoric” (66). If the Republicans, headed by Bush, transformed American tragedy into travesty, Spiegelman achieves a similar effect by using postmodern parody or pastiche of the comic strips. After all, for the same reason he created a palimpsest in which he confronts the headlines linked with the terrorist attack on 9/11 with the reprint of the newspaper articles from September 11, 1901, which reported on the arrest of the anarchist Emma Goldman—who was accused of plotting to assassinate American President William McKinley—and on the President’s health.

Spiegelman’s graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*, but also both volumes of *Maus*, demonstrate that the health of individuals is closely connected with the health of the nation. They reflect the conversion of traumatic history into narrative memory. Although the collective trauma of 9/11 has contributed to the process of forming national identity, Spiegelman is aware of the danger of this process, criticizing the false patriotism of Americans after the tragic events and the abuse of the events by the government. Both works, however, articulate a “complex intersection between identity, the past, memory, and culture and, centrally, they concern the process by which identification takes place and then is



<http://homepage.mac.com/merus-sell/iblog/B835531044/C31175526/E763591778/index.html>

developed” (Eaglestone 81). There are still some questions left. How has the author managed to come to terms with the trauma? Has he, in his obsessive reenactment of overwhelming events, remained at the stage of ‘acting out’, or has he ‘worked through’ the trauma? Has paranoia affected only individuals or the whole American nation? The first three frames of *No Towers* give a partial answer to these questions. Even if the American nation, represented by a drowsing family in front of the TV, has returned to normal, it has been profoundly changed, which is symbolized by the figures’ hair standing on end.

What Spiegelman’s books make clear is the fact that forgetting or the repression of memories, conveyed through silence, *is not* an effective way for an individual or nation to achieve recovery. They confirm Hillary Chute’s assertion that the most important graphic narratives present “a traumatic side of history” but they “refuse to show it through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice” (459). After all, Spiegelman’s entire work

evidences his deep social commitment, his urge to voice his opinions that manifest his sense of responsibility for the state of this world. Regarding his artistic nature, in comic books/graphic novels he has found the most appropriate medium to do so.

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