

# COMICS IN ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION

Notes from a Decentered Medium

**Academia is a sensitive business. From communicating about subjects from genocide to political inclusion and medical ethics, the efficacy with which researchers and institutes of higher education reach a broader public depends on their ability to speak with integrity and empathy. In short, the university is obliged to foster an attitude of sensitivity: an attunement to those discourses of the past that have shaped our views of the present, and a receptivity to modes of thought that lie ahead.** This task comes with its own challenges. As demonstrated at last year's conference *Forum Wissenschaftskommunikation 2024*, if academic communication is to champion democratic values and open societies, it must address our present-day geopolitical crisis of "(post)-facticity" and defend intellectual freedoms while resisting political instrumentalization.<sup>1</sup>

This article proposes that comics offer new avenues for *Wissenschaftskommunikation* to think through these challenges based on what we could term the decentered nature of this medium. In the context of cognitive psychology, decentering refers to an act of so-called "meta-cognitive" awareness: the abili-

ty of the individual to step outside of their immediate experience, thereby changing the very nature of that experience."<sup>2</sup> Just as individuals can develop this capacity in everyday life, so too do the properties of comics as a pictorial and graphic form make it particularly well-suited to decentering the reader, thereby allowing them to reassess the world around them. This kind of self-reflexive communication emerges out of graphic literature's tendency toward condensation, multidimensionality, and hermeneutic depth.

Readers familiar with *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning second-generation memoir of the Holocaust, will recognize that comics as a literary form have historically not only ventured into realms of societal taboo but reconfigured the possibilities for coming to terms with trauma, violence and suffering. With reference to the seemingly oppositional values of synthesis and ambiguity in comics'

communicative strategies, this article outlines their formal qualities—such semantic "non-redundancy"—and considers their application for communication in higher education.

Comics are no stranger to controversy. Some of the earliest examples of the medium commonly defined as "graphic art in deliberate sequence" are devoted to depicting the unrepresentable.<sup>3</sup> Francisco de Goya's engraved series "The Disasters of War" (Fig. 1) documents the horrors of the Peninsular Napoleonic wars of the early 19th Century in graphic details: mutilated bodies of civilians in and around the artist's birthplace of Zaragoza; the senseless slaughter of women and children. Beyond this remarkable decision to bear witness to the suffering of ordinary people whose fates find no mention in the history books, Goya's cartoons and later engraved plates stand out in the art-historical continuum for their use of text. Drawn images of ex-



Photo: L. Bianchi, Bogliasso Foundation

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ecution squads and terrorized innocents are underlined by captions whose swung cursive belies their elocutionary force: “This I saw”. “One cannot look at this”. Rounded off with decisive full-stops, these laconic comments represent a pivot away from pictorial expression to the expressive potential of “comics” as a medium. As Hillary Chute argues in her 2016 book *Disaster Drawn*, the very slippage between image and word, the “nonredundancy” of the textual element, brings the image into a tension that packs a particular punch.<sup>4</sup> In the act of visually decoding the image and reading the text, the viewer necessarily contravenes the artist’s injunction: like him, we look at what cannot be viewed and catch ourselves in the ethical quandary of spectatorship. We emerge from the frame askew, our relationship to the suffering of others ever so slightly more examined, our “implicated subjectivity” that much closer to the forefront of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Comics disabuse us of the notion that memory, including institutional memory, is in any way fixed; indeed, that memory has any meaning as distinct from our current position in the present and our beliefs, fears, and hopes about the future. In my research on a corpus of drawings made by victims of the Holocaust incarcerated in European camps, I am repeatedly struck by

this coagulation of time past, present and future on the graphic page. In one drawing (Fig. 2), an undulating colored ribbon cordons off three panels denoted by years in the twentieth century: 1929, 1943 and 1957. In the center of the composition, an adolescent girl peers out from a bunk. Behind her, a brown jacket hangs limply on the wall, its yellow star only visible on closer inspection. This little-known miniature graphic narrative was drawn in the Theresienstadt ghetto by the Prague-born artist Helga Weissová. It had a functional purpose: to serve as a birthday card for the artist’s friend Franzi, on the occasion of her fourteenth birthday in the ghetto.

If we spend time with the image, its use of doubles becomes clear: two white bed frames and name cards on the wall in the first left-hand segment, a pair of bunk beds in the central barracks scene. Finally, what first appears to be one woman pushing her baby carriage in the right-hand section turns out to be a duo: two mothers walking in tandem in a bustling cityscape. The figure of repetition, we now recognize, is echoed at the level of temporality: each segment is separated by an interval of exactly fourteen years. From the moment of the image’s creation in 1943, the artist is envisioning her lifespan rewound back by just as much to its inception: the girls’ two mothers side by side on

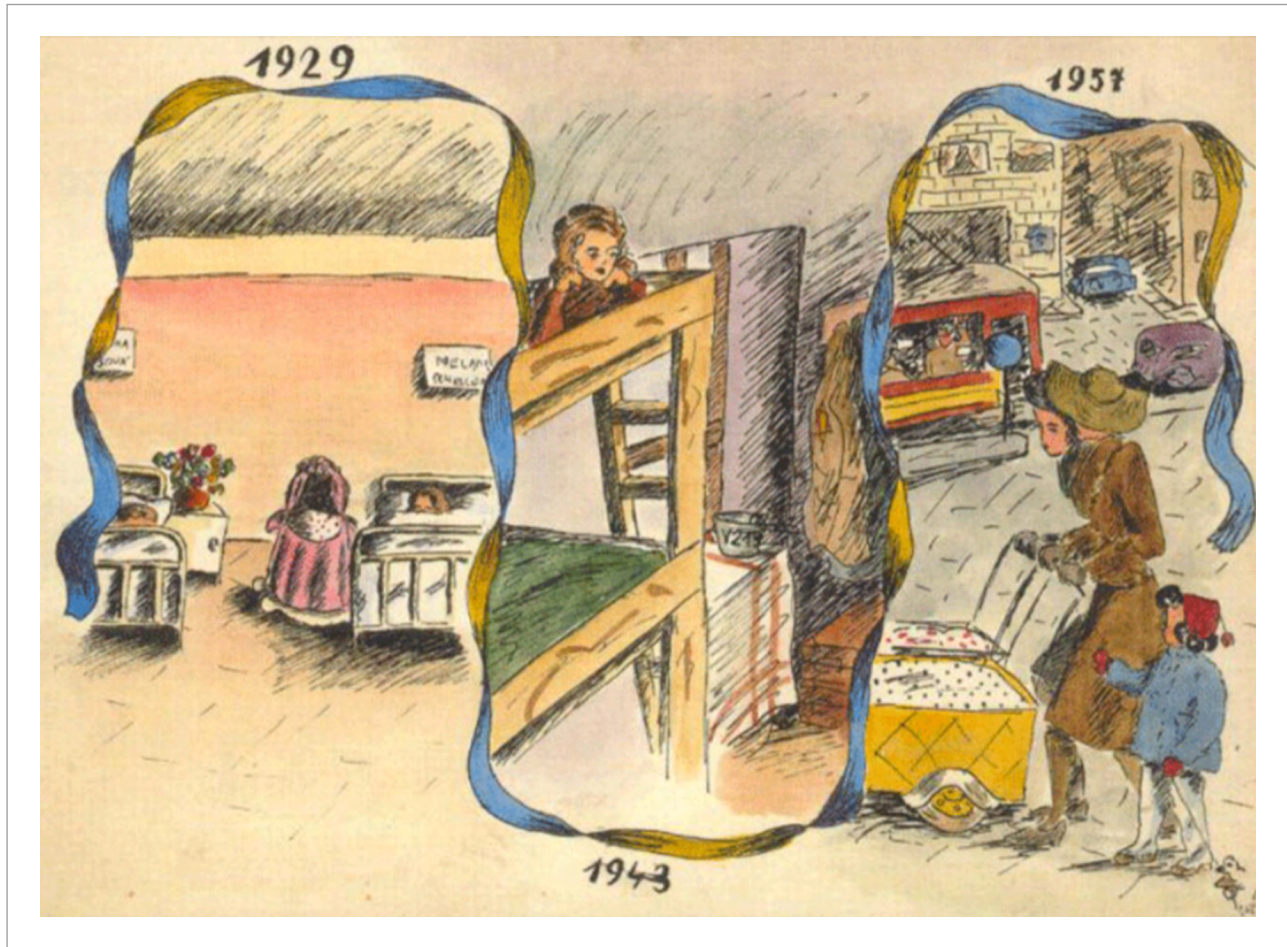
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the maternity ward in 1929. From the time-present of the middle panel, the figure gazes down over the boundary of the blue and yellow “gutter” (the technical term for the division between panels) onto a vision of peacetime Prague yet to come, still a figment of the imagination. The mirage was to prove half-true: Franzi perished in Auschwitz the following year in 1944, whereas Helga returned to Prague, where she is currently approaching her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In a 2013 interview about his two-volume graphic memoir *Maus*, Art Spiegelman explained, “the real story of *Maus* is not an ‘Auschwitz for Beginners’ but it’s a story of a son trying to understand his father’s life, and the son’s



**Fig. 1:** Francisco de Goya, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, 1810-1820



**Fig. 2:** For her 14<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Helga Weissová © Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen

a cartoonist so he tries to understand it by putting it in little boxes [...]”. Comics, Spiegelman always thought, were an especially good form for “dealing with memory”.<sup>6</sup> Memory, like grief, is processual in nature: the architecture of panels on the graphic page offers a scaffold for mapping. Within their borders, conventions of narrative telling are suspended: secular Jews in Rego Park, N.Y. can be figured as humanoid figures with mouse heads; non-Jewish Americans, in contrast, as cartoon canines. While this love of visual distortion and imaginative play is at the heart of comics’ mimetic impulse, doodling and its particular relationship to truth is a question that comics authors take very seriously. When The New York Times listed *Maus* in their fiction category,

Spiegelman submitted a caustic letter to the paper. The paper’s decision to label his painstakingly researched testament to his father’s experiences of Poland and the death camps in WWII as “make-believe,” he wrote, would surely fill the likes of David Duke, then-leader of the white nationalist Klu Klux Klan, with unbridled glee.

But neither are great comics hampered by a dogmatism to consistency in their choice of expressive means: Spiegelman’s family memoir unsettles its own mode of recovering the past through drawing images through the use of photographic inserts. A photograph of Art’s father, Vladek, in his camp uniform, though, is no sooner pasted onto the page than the cartooned boxes undermine its value as an objec-

tive, indexical marker of history in the fashion of Leopold von Ranke’s “Wie es eigentlich gewesen”: Vladek’s mouse avatar reveals the photograph was a fake, staged in a souvenir shop after the war. At their best, then, comics foster media literacy through the marks on the page, working against the invisibilizing force of hegemonic cultural narratives and pointing up the fallibility of the image.

Just as Spiegelman, like Goya, forces the reader to engage with the fabrication of his artistic endeavor (Art’s figure in the cartoon panel goes to pick up the photograph we see on the page), so too do contemporary comics center a kind of meta-self-reflection within their medial practice. In *Residenz Fahrenbühl*, a darkly comic response to the isolation of the year 2020, the leading German



Fig. 3: Art Spiegelman, The Complete Maus (1986)

comics author Anna Haifisch turns a satirical eye to the contemporary format of the artist's residence and the vagaries of the creative ego in the second decade of the 21st century. Sketched with a willed roughness of stroke, Haifisch presents the reader with two sus-

piciously mousy-looking protagonists united only by the questionable honor of spending the winter working on their respective artistic endeavours in a spartan barn in the German province. If at first glance the anthropomorphic rodent figures on the page pay hom-

age to *Maus*, Spiegelman's metaphor is here invoked to portray different kind of victimhood: the suffering of the un-inspired creative.

What should be a buoyant return to a state of flow in the broad expanses of nature immediately descends into a

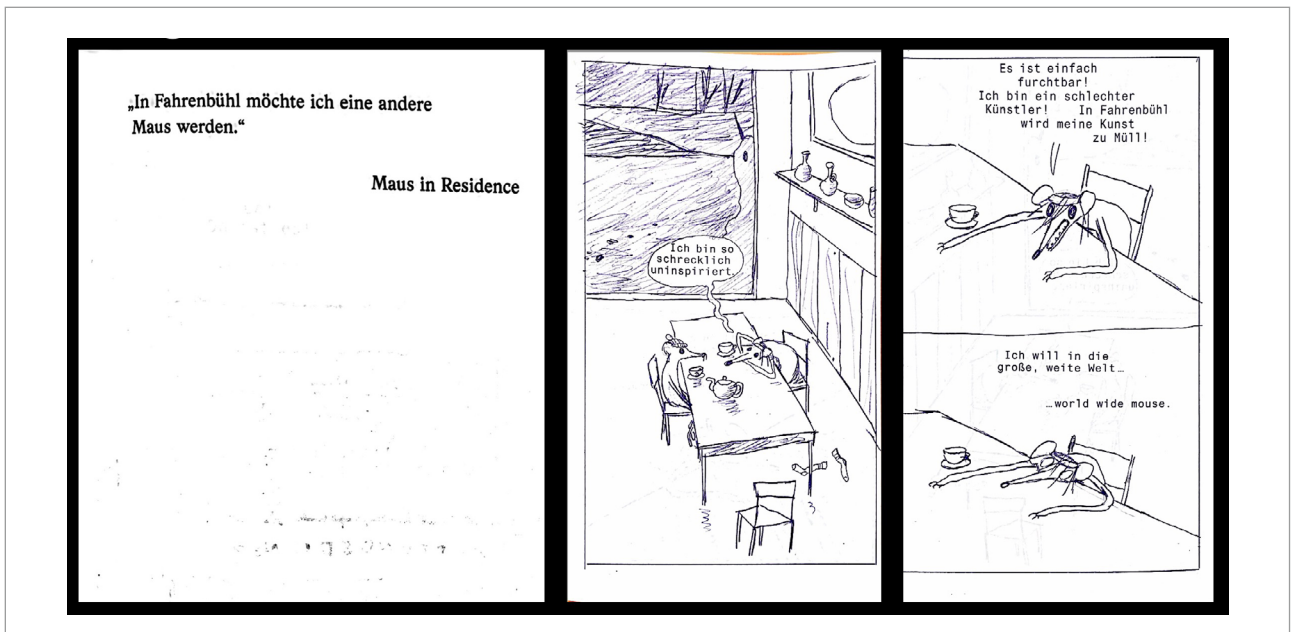


Fig. 4: Anna Haifisch, Residenz Fahrenbuhl, 2021



Fig. 5: Residenz Fahrenbuhl, 2021

macabre tale of unproductivity and self-doubt, leading to the crushing realization of one's own mediocrity. Ciphers for the all-too-human, the endearing cartoon mice hurtle toward mutual destruction, driven by petty jealousies and self-loathing. But in good comics tradition, redemption comes when the medium reminds us of the slippage between word and image.

Out on a mental-health walk in their radically isolated environs, the

mice discover the closest thing they have to neighbors: a herd of local cows. In a lyrical moment of release that spreads languorously over a double page, Haifisch's rodent avatar marvels at the bovine family: "I wish animals could speak". And in this moment—worthy of Magritte—the counterintuitive honesty of comics seems to stop the clock, giving voice both to the fallibility and the peculiar grace of the human condition. ■



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### QUELLEN

- 1 Forum Wissenschaftskommunikation 2024: "Wissenschaftskommunikation für eine starke Demokratie und offene Gesellschaft", 11. und 12. Dezember, Urania Berlin 2024.
- 2 Safran & Segal, 1990, 117.
- 3 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 1994, 9.
- 4 "Viewers of The Disasters of War become aware of their own processes of perception in the quick cognitive impulse to match caption to image—one looks for explanatory confirmations from each that often do not exist, so that one is frequently aware of the space between word and image, their nonredundancy." Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 2016, 54.
- 5 See Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, 2019.
- 6 Phillip Adams, "Life after Maus with Art Spiegelman," *Late Night Live*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National, October 2, 2013, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/art-spiegelman/4991676>.