

Maus and the teaching of Gabriel Marcel

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Bachelor thesis
Philosophy: War and Peace
International Studies
Leiden University
2015

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Introduction

The present year marks the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp, and still, the Nazi crimes that occurred between 1933 and 1945 still belong to the most important traumas of the western societies. They have been for a long time also one of the main taboos: until the 1970s, very little has been written and shown about the atrocities. From a period during which these crimes were unimaginable to today, where these crimes constitute a consistent part of our history and identity, there has been a long road, and a lot has still to be done. The 1970s not only mark the wide unveiling of the concentration camps and of the ‘final solution’ to the general public, but also the beginning of revisionist and negationist movements of thoughts that never disappeared since. The promotion and discussion of the numerous testimonies of the victims collected form part of what the French call ‘le devoir de mémoire’ (literally ‘the duty of memory’) and is essential for new generations to be aware of what the mankind is capable of. This bachelor thesis will present and discuss two works that give evidence of this period of time from two different authors: Gabriel Marcel and Art Spiegelman. The historical background and the link to the present as introduced in this introduction will be secondary to the detriment of a philosophical analysis.

The research question is as follows: How can Spiegelman's interpretation of the Nazi crimes against the Jewish people, as given in his graphic book *Maus*, be elucidated in light of Gabriel Marcel's conceptualization of degradation techniques? Two works will be at the center of this study: the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale Book II* by Art Spiegelman published in 1991 (that will be referred as '*Maus II*') and the work of Gabriel Marcel with a special attention given to his essay *Les Hommes contre l'humain* published in 1951 in which the notion of ‘degradation technique’ (‘technique d’avilissement’) is introduced.

This research question refers to wider ones: how to bring image and discursivity into a meaningful relation to each other? How to analyze a graphic novel in the light of a philosophical essay? To what extent is the scope of Marcel's ideas, particularly on war, universal and useful for a better understanding of a more recent piece of work? These questions will be answered *a fortiori* by the analysis of the main research question and by following a strict methodology. Eventually, The approach taken in this thesis, namely re-reading a comic book in light of a philosophical text and thus bestow a philosophical value to a work not created for that aim, will hopefully contribute to the academic field of philosophy.

This research can indeed be situated in the larger framework of linking visual arts and philosophical texts. The two documents that will be studied, *Maus* and *Les hommes contre l'humain*, both focus

on the most important event of our recent history but portray it in two very different manners. The form is different as well as the purpose: Marcel resorts to philosophy in order to illustrate his existentialist views of human being and how 'transcendence' is the ultimate response in such extreme cases, whereas Spiegelman attempts to keep alive his father's testimony that he told him about his experience in Auschwitz concentration camp and turns his personal experience into an educational and informative artwork (Marcel 23) . Furthermore, these two texts are representative of two different periods of time, which adds substance to the research even though this aspect will not be discussed in the following pages. Researches consisting of drawing parallels between philosophical texts and artworks are still very scarce in the academic world, and this thesis will attempt to result on an original comparison.

Through the oral testimony of his father, Art Spiegelman delivers a unique as well as subjective inside look into the Nazi crimes during the Second World War. The two parts of this testimony – before the arrival at Auschwitz concentration camp and during the detention – illustrate the impotence of Vladek Spiegelman as a prisoner and his will to resist to the physical and moral oppression by the nazis as much as possible. The highly symbolic choice of Spiegelman to represent the Jews as mice, the Nazis as cats and the Polish as pigs embodies this idea that the weaker animal, the mouse, undergoes violence from all the other animals without being able to react. In this thesis, we will mainly focus on the second book of Spiegelman's artwork, in which the character of Vladek undergoes the atrocities of Auchswitz, for the reason that it relates more directly to Gabriel Marcel's reflexion on 'degradation techniques'. The notion of abasement, a core notion in the case of concentration camp prisoners, is indeed at the heart of Gabriel Marcel's conceptualization of these techniques. Marcel argues that the victims of the Holocaust underwent a de-humanization depriving any human being from their essential freedom of thought (Marcel 18). Marcel eventually evokes 'transcendence' as an escape of these degradation techniques whereas Spiegelman, true to his descriptive approach, does not draw any moral conclusion nor deliver any recommendations from his father's experience. This aspect of *Maus* is in fact what makes it so powerful: the description is not used to share a specific message or moral but but only for the sake of sharing what the life at Auschwitz was about. That is in essence what differs between this philosophical essay and the descriptive comic and, as such, analyzing *Maus* in light of Marcel's conceptual tools and distinctions is a meaningful way to analyze two voices about the Holocaust who use two different means. The common points are numerous without being too obvious. This research will attempt to be an innovative comparative analysis between a philosophical notion initiated by a French Christian existentialist in the 1950s and a graphic novel by a Jewish American author in the 1980s.

This thesis will be structured as follows. The first chapter will introduce *Maus* by Art Spiegelman with a special focus on the very nature of this artwork and on its compatibility with the narratives of war. The second chapter will then consist of questioning the discursive power of images in light of Roland Barthes' essay *Rhétorique de l'image*. This is essential to be able to discuss the comic strips of *Maus* with any coherence and following a specific methodology. The third chapter, then, will present Marcel's main concepts in *Les Hommes contre l'humain* that will consequently be applied to *Maus*. We will then conclude in the fourth chapter.

Chapter I: An introduction to *Maus*

The second book of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* will be analyzed in this first chapter of this research. This second volume, published in 1991, is subtitled as: *And Here My Troubles Began*; indeed, this part starts with the arrival of the main character of the story, Vladek Spiegelman, Art Spiegelman's father, at the Auschwitz concentration camp. After having tried to escape deportation, the married couple Vladek and Anja, two Polish Jews arrive in the Poland-based concentration camp, the widest Nazi camp. The first volume of *Maus* depicts this escalation of anti-jewish measures and public opinion, while Vladek tries to convince himself and his wife that such things as concentration camps can not possibly exist. This aspect has been integrated into the narrative in order to reinforce the contrast with the atrocities described in the second volume. At the beginning of the second volume, Vladek and Anja are separated at the entrance of the camp. They will not see each other again, nor get any information from each other for most of the 10 months that they will spend in Auschwitz. During his imprisonment, Vladek encounters many other interns that importantly shape his experience. The narrative exclusively focuses on Vladek, according to the way he orally described his experience to his son. The story is told using a subtle *mise en abyme* structure: at the beginning of the second volume, Art and his wife arrive at Vladek's house, and Vladek starts telling his stories to his son. Art Spiegelman juggles between two different levels of temporality; a third one is even used, 'the present' at the moment of drawing, but not as strongly as the two other. The following strips show these three levels of temporality.



The three levels of temporality in *Maus* (24, 34, 43)

Art Spiegelman bases his graphic novel in the oral testimony of his father and is aware of every bias: the memory of his father is not infallible, and the way he himself understands this testimony is also not completely objective nor exhaustive. The last strip of the example above depicts that aspect as well: Spiegelman is well aware of his own weaknesses. The story the reader is given to read is thus not a direct testimony but has already been subject to interpretation at least twice. More than a simple factual and linear description of what the conditions at Auschwitz were, this 'fictionalized' testimony tells a lot about the de-humanizing conditions the prisoners were subject to. Prisoners, and in this case Vladek, could not believe what they were yet personally witnessing because it exceeded every expectation or even imagination, while they were full of hunger, fear, and

exhaustion. Also, there is an intended and well-thought alternation in the storytelling between some form of levity - when Art and his wife live with Vladek and have usual activities such as cooking - and an extreme gravity. This alternation reinforces the contrast between the usual life most of us experience nowadays and what the experience of Auschwitz was. *Maus* is a graphic novel that has inspired scholars from many fields, and a considerable number of articles have been written about it in the recent years. However, each of them has a different approach of the question, which results on a highly heterogeneous literature on the topic. Many contradictory arguments are defended about it, and especially on its nature and on its narratives of war. The question this chapter will try to answer is the following: What is the nature of this artwork? What is the main discourses used by Spiegelman in order to describe the atrocities of the Holocaust as experienced by his father? To what degree are the nature and the content of this artwork compatible? Answering these questions will provide an insight of the complexity of *Maus* and prepare the ground for further analyses in the following chapter. Overall, we will defend the idea that *Maus* can be perceived as a biography, and that the form of the graphic novel fits with the narrative about the Holocaust.

1.1 The nature of *Maus*

At the time when *Maus* was initially published, only a minority of critics were considering comics in literary discourse. The very nature of *Maus* has been a controversial question at its publication and its accession within the New York Times bestselling list in 1992 in the 'fiction' branch¹. Indeed, the main issue revolves around defining whether *Maus* is a fiction or a biography. This concern is essential to the analysis in the following chapter in order to define how to consider *Maus*: is it a testimony of Vladek Spiegelman or a fiction centered around the character of Vladek? The biases presented in the introduction of this chapter evidently alter the biographical aspect of the work. For some, *Maus* is the embodiment of very first graphic novel; for others, *Maus* is not a graphic novel at all but rather a biography, or even an autobiography. The narrative of *Maus* is indeed much more complex than it seems. Generally considered as a graphic novel, the author and the narrator should be distinct in *Maus*, but Spiegelman plays on that distinction and blurs it entirely. As Andrea Freud Loewenstein² argues, "Spiegelman prevents his readers from separating author and narrator through the constant interweaving of the main or 'primary' narrative of Vladek's

¹ Thomas Doherty. "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust." *American Literature*, Volume 68, Number 1, Duke University Press. March 1996.

² Andrea Freud Loewenstein. "Confronting Stereotypes: *Maus* in Crown Heights." *College English*, Volume 60, Number 4. Apr 1998.

wartime experiences with the 'secondary' narrative of Artie's composing process and his interaction with his father" (Loewenstein 403). Yet, this distinction is usually an important one in the categorization of a work; if author and narrator are entirely distinct, the work tends to be a fiction and vice versa. *Maus* evidently presents fictional aspects that smoothen the structure. Spiegelman incorporates these fictional elements mostly to guide the reader in his reflexion. For instance, doubts are legitimate about the authenticity scene during which Art, his wife and Vladek encounter a colored hitchhiker, but Spiegelman uses it in order to illustrate a point: the concentration camps did not make his father any more tolerant. Spiegelman also resorts to other fictional elements. Humor is widely used throughout *Maus II*, even in the most dramatic moments. These elements seem to support the idea that *Maus* can be perceived as a fiction.



Fictional elements in *Maus* (98, 28)

On the other hand, despite these elements, it can be argued that *Maus*' biographical elements surpass the fictional ones. *Maus* has been nominated for the National Books Critics' Circle award in the biography branch in 1987, and Spiegelman himself claims the autobiographical character of his artwork. He personally asked the New York Times to move his work from fictional to non-fictional section. Spiegelman argues that his work is "an autobiographical history of [his] relationship with [his] father"³. Rosemary Hathaway⁴ argues that *Maus* can even be considered as Art's autobiography because "Art's own stories often focus on the ways in which his family's Holocaust trauma has become his trauma, and the ways in which he has inherited his parents' survivor

³ Spiegelman, interview with author, Dec. 1991; Spiegelman, 'Commix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview,' *Print* 42 (Nov.-Dec. 1998): 196

⁴ Rosemary V. Hathaway. "Reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as Postmodern Ethnography." *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol 48, No 3. 2011

guilt" (Hathaway 250). Indeed, Spiegelman's storytelling includes his own impressions on his father's testimony, such as in the following example.



Art's personal impressions (*Maus*, 90)

In our research, we will attest these biographical and autobiographical aspects of *Maus*. The latter will be considered as a unique testimony of the Holocaust translated in an original structure. It does not undermine any fictional elements present in *Maus*, but these elements seem to rather apply on the form and contextualization rather than on the substance of the testimony. Also, on a more general note, Spiegelman fought the appellation of his work as a whole using the words 'comics' which, for him, presupposes the use of humor. This element is a strong part of the San Francisco-based underground movement he emerged, later referred to as the 'underground comix'. This movement launched the consideration of this artwork as a way to picture, interpret, but also contest current societal debates. As a result, the appellation 'graphic novel' seems the most appropriate.

1.2 The narrative in *Maus* and its compatibility with the form

There would be no *Maus* without the Holocaust; the core purpose of this graphic novel is to picture this event of history. In addition to the most emblematic films and photographs of the Nazi crimes, *Maus* is one of the most emblematic testimonies of this period of time, and has become a main representation of the Holocaust for the ones that had the chance not to experience it. Its innovative style and storytelling and the very adequate combination of the two have played an immense role in this success. On the contrary to most of the artworks on the topic, *Maus* seems not to focus on specific aspects but rather portrays every aspect of the Holocaust in a cold and objective way.

In any form of art, and especially in visual ones, the Holocaust is one of the most problematic topics to portray. For the Nazis themselves, art was more than a mean of expression: it was the rationale of

the regime. Through propaganda, it was a way to portray perfection and to put images on what had to be condemned: the 'entartete Kunst' ('degenerate art') (Doherty 72). Since, the most faithful to reality forms of visual arts - namely photographs and films - have always been criticized because they could also be interpreted as a promotion of the Nazi regime. This topic is thus extremely sensitive, and the few real images of the concentration camps are not open for public use. In this context, the form of the graphic novel seems especially adequate as a good compromise between showing too much and not showing enough. From a classical or traditional point of view, the form of the comic book is often considered as a simplistic way to portray situations and is mostly destined to children or as belonging to an underground culture, this can also turn out to be an advantage. Thomas Doherty argues that "the cartoon medium possesses a graphic quality well-suited to a confrontation with Nazism and the Holocaust" (Doherty 71). The cartoonist is indeed completely free of what to show and what not to show, to the contrary of photographers that control the frame of their picture but cannot shape the elements in them. In the case of *Maus*, Doherty argues that "the medium is not the message, but is bound up with the message, with the ideology of Nazism and the artist's critique of it" (Doherty 71). In his treatment of the Holocaust, Spiegelman indeed not only considers Nazis as having a historical value but also an artistic one. With *Maus*, Spiegelman has developed a new monochrome style with high contrast and little detail. Comic books offer "little chance of complicity with the aesthetics of Nazism" because "it evokes rather than records the human form" (Doherty 74). This tendency to simplification and the voluntary lack of details in Spiegelman's style tends to get around the main critics of visual arts when treating the Holocaust: its purpose can hardly be misinterpreted or abused. The following example embodies this idea: here, the image is incredibly powerful and cannot be subject to any positive or devious interpretation.



Spiegelman's simple and monochromatic style in *Maus* (27)

In order to conduct a more in-depth analysis on *Maus*' content and storytelling, we first have to question the discursive power of image and to establish a methodology on how to read images. This leads us to the second chapter of this research.

Chapter II: The discursive power of images

The second chapter of this research will consist of a methodological analysis of the relationship between written discourse and imagery. How can images be translated into words? How to reflect on images? Do images have a discursive dimension that would allow an in-depth analysis? This chapter will revolve around those questions. Ultimately, it will result in a proposal for a concise reading methodology as regards images and, more particularly, as can be found in the graphic novel *Maus II*. This part is crucial to this research since the main task for our study concerns a comic book, and one of the major challenges will be to avoid falling into subjective interpretations of the comic strips. For that purpose, an article written by Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image"⁵, will be at the core of the reflexion. This article, published in 1964, questions the different interpretation of images. Barthes, prominent figure of the cultural studies and semiotics, sparked numerous debates and outraged many when he announced the death of the author, meaning that the author plays no role in how the reader ought to understand and interpret his very own work. In other words, the author is vulnerable and can not control his own writings, which is of course a highly controversial statement in the academic and literary world. This view testifies Barthes' philosophy as an attempt to enhance critical thinking in the field of linguistics, cultural studies and semiotics. Genuinely interested in problems such as mass consumption, and, what he would call, the 'myths of our modern societies', Barthes was also very interested in the power of the image and of representation, especially in the world of advertisement. The study of this very technical article, "Rhétorique de l'image", will help us develop a methodological strategy regarding the philosophical analysis of imagery and pictures. It can be argued that different thinkers could have been used in this context such as Jacques Derrida, but it would have been more challenging then to conclude with a clear manner on how to analyze images. Indeed, even though both argue that linguistic signs have to be placed in a social context in order to explain why and how they work, Derrida tends to challenge even more the language itself and argues that there is no such thing as a meaning of a

⁵ Roland Barthes. Rhétorique de l'image. In: *Communications*, 4, 1964. pp. 40-51.

text⁶. Since this thesis will focus more on the relationship between a philosophical text and a comic book, this statement would have been too strong.

2.1 Three different messages

The question of image, meaning, systems of thought, connotation and denotation are redundant in Barthes' work. The text "Rhétorique de l'image" has been chosen to support the argument of this thesis because of its conciseness and its adequate argumentation. Barthes begins his analysis with a simple statement: any image is polysemic by nature and may have various meanings (Barthes 40). This statement already goes against numerous academic approaches that altogether contest the idea of images as a language. Barthes explores a specific image for the sake of illustrating his further comments - an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani - and goes through the different layers of the image to finally establish the linguistic virtues of images. The choice of using an advertisement is made by Barthes in order to avoid generating a new debate. In the case of an advertisement, the meaning is assumed to be more clearly intended and intentional than in other forms of images. Barthes develops the idea that an image has three different messages: a linguistic message, a symbolic or coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message (Barthes 41). Each of these messages has specific characteristics and contributes to a reading and an understanding of the image as a whole. The linguistic message entails the presence of textuality in any image; in the case of a comic book, it concerns either the recitative (as the voice-over) or the words of the characters between each other. This linguistic message, however, is present in most of the images in the form of branding, titles, or dialogues in films. The symbolic message refers to all the symbols and signs that inevitably come into one's mind when looking at an image. They are specific to cultural groups; each culture has different symbols and interprets images depending on its knowledge. The third message is the non-coded iconic message. Barthes defines it as the relationship between the signifier and the signified and thereby explores one of the key concepts of cultural studies. Originally introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure⁷, this model divides the signification of a word into two distinct but interrelated fields: signifier and signified. The signifier is the word itself or the acoustic image, whereas the signified is the reference. The two combined create the signification, or the sign (Barthes 41). This relationship between the two as described by

⁶ Leonard Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Spring 2014.

⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a swiss linguist. He is known as the father of linguistic structuralism and laid the groundwork of semiotics.

Barthes is specific to every individual and does not rely on any form of knowledge, but only on the viewer's own natural inclination. Here, Barthes delivers a critique of structural linguistics by arguing that this relationship is subject to change and does not guarantee an ultimate truth. Three different messages thus constitute a given image, and the combination of the three results in the meaning of an image. This meaning is, first of all, personal to any individual because of the third, non-coded message, but also, to a certain extent, common to a same group of people that share the same chain of signified, and there is finally a neutral aspect to it: the linguistic message. What are the relationships between the three messages of an image as identified by Barthes? How can they help reading and interpreting accurately an image?

2.2 The relationship between the three messages

Barthes argues that the non-coded iconic message serves as a support to the symbolic one. It completes and procures the uniqueness of each interpretation. The term 'iconic' is crucial in Barthes' reflexion as opposed to the motivated and arbitrary. An iconic message or sign only has one function, whereas the motivated one has multiple and the arbitrary message or sign has an infinite number of possible functions. One of the most important relations, especially when it comes to the analysis of a graphic novel, is the one between the linguistic message and the iconic message. How are a text and an image related? Does a text support or limit an image? Barthes argues that a text has two functions vis-a-vis the iconic message: anchoring and relaying. The French scholar argues that each society has specific and diverse techniques in order to fix the "floating chain of signified" (Barthes 44). Anchoring is one of these techniques and permits to choose the correct "level of perception" to understand the image as the designer intended to. The anchoring technique is thus a way to guide, but also to control that the image is interpreted correctly. It fixes a certain meaning, as, for example, a description of a photograph does. The second function of the linguistic message vis-a-vis the iconic message is the one of relaying. In this case, the text is complementary to the image; both are a way to deliver informations and have an informative value. Text and image are complementary and of the same importance - they both are necessary to understand the other - whereas in the case of anchoring the meaning is dependent on the text, which contains all the information in itself. In the case of graphic novels, the text essentially has this second relaying function, but both are used. Anchoring is often used as the beginning of chapters as a way to contextualize the action, or as a voice-over in the case of a *mise en abyme* of the action such as in *Maus*. The relaying system is at the heart of the graphic novel structure: all the dialogues between characters enter that system. Indeed, in the case of a typical comic strip involving two characters

talking, both the text and the image are essential and deliver an information to the viewer. Often, both methods are used in a same comic strip, such as in the following example, where the dialogues between the characters fall under the relaying method, whereas the voice-over falls under the anchoring one.



Example of the use of anchoring and relaying in *Maus* (26)

The discursive dimension of an image has been discussed in this chapter. Roland Barthes' semiotical approach is very appropriate and already widely used in the study of graphic novels. Indeed, other academic fields such as the linguistics would argue that images are not a language but rather a limitation of language. This approach would extensively limit the study of images as such. According to Barthes' approach, the different meanings a same image can have depend on individual perception but also on a chain of signified shared within a same group of individuals. The presence of text with the images also have a defined role either of anchoring or relaying. As a result, the subsequent study of the graphic novel *Maus II* will stick to that approach and images will be analyzed and comprehended based on this model. Firstly, it will be assumed that the reading of *Maus* that will be delivered will not be the only one existing nor necessarily the most accurate one. The interpretation that will be delivered will be based on the original text in English, but looked at 25 years after its publication. It also presupposes several acquired concerning World War II, the Nazi regime and the situation of Germany at the time. Not explicitly detailed in *Maus II*, this background knowledge is however important and presupposed in the reading of it as it is a testimony that illustrates this historical situation. Furthermore, from a semiotic approach, the choice of Spiegelman of portraying the Jewish prisoners as mice, the Polish as pigs, the French as frogs and the Nazis as cats also presupposed a number of signs that fit into the symbolic or iconic message: mice are chased by cats, pigs are extremely obedient, and frogs represent French in many countries because of their culinary habits. Another important iconic sign that characterizes *Maus* is the choice of not using any color. The whole story is drawn in black and white, and at least two

points are expected as acquired here. First of all, the absence of any color creates an atmosphere of despair and of lack of any form of living that fit with the story. Secondly, Art Spiegelman started his career in San Francisco in an underground artists' collective in which this rather provocative choice of not using color was acclaimed. The symbolic identifiable signs will thus be highlight in the analysis on the contrary of the non-coded iconic ones that are, by definition, not identifiable. However, this limit is actually not necessarily one; even though the analysis will be as neutral as possible, the subjective elements will make this research unique and personal.

Chapter III: The philosophy of Gabriel Marcel and *Maus*

The third chapter of this thesis will now be presented. Gabriel Marcel's *Les Hommes contre l'humain*, already briefly introduced above, will be at the center of reflexion. The introduction of *Maus* in the previous chapter has tried to highlight the main notions of war and technique present throughout Vladek's experience. This third chapter will connect these notions to Marcel's reflexion on war and on the role of technique as a tool for persecutors to achieve their aim. An elucidation of *Maus* in light of the most adequate concepts of Gabriel Marcel will be presented in this chapter. In the third chapter of the book, entitled "Les techniques d'avilissement" ("techniques of degradation"), Marcel argues that the mankind is experiencing a deep metaphysical crisis, which leads to a questioning of the concepts of liberty and freedom of thought. As the title indicates, Marcel focuses in this chapter on the notion of 'technique', and more especially on the techniques developed by prosecutors to debase as much as possible their victims. He refers to the latter as the "degradation techniques" (Marcel 33). According to him, even though technique is not bad in essence and has lead to numerous crucial from of progress throughout modern history, the way technique is used in our modern societies is perverting the human being who is becoming a mere technical man (Marcel 33). Our society is becoming more and more materialistic, leaving behind any idea of transcendence, but also of love and fraternity, which eventually leads to "sin" (Marcel 63). As one of the first philosophers to open the breach of discussions revolving around the Holocaust, his statements were even stronger at the time than they are now. Taking into account the most recent events at the time it was published, the rather pessimistic views of Marcel are intelligible. His main concern in *Les Hommes contre l'humain* is the relation between technology, religion, and freedom. He argues that the present society has lost a great part of its freedom due to the growing influence of technologies that degrade the human condition. The following analysis

will not be argumentative but discursive. All the concepts will be used in order to elucidate and put a new light on *Maus* by using Marcel's discourse rather than argumentation. We will elaborate on Marcel's thoughts inasmuch as they relate to *Maus* and allow for a better grasp of this comic novel. Marcel has been one of the first ones to break the taboo of writing openly about the Holocaust. At the beginning of the 1950, the Holocaust was indeed totally absent of the public sphere in France. When the film *Nuit et Brouillard* was released in 1955⁸, both the audience and the authorities were outraged by these first images of concentration camps presented to the general public, even though the film did not even mention the term Jew at all. The full recognition of the anti-Jewish aspect of the Nazi crimes in the public sphere came years later. Marcel uses the Nazi crimes as a demonstration of the extreme dangers technology can lead to and how these crimes lead to a de-humanization of the victims. In this chapter, the main concepts introduced by Marcel and relevant to the reading and understanding of *Maus* will be presented and discussed in the first part. Subsequently, the second part will use these elements to read and interpret *Maus II*.

3.1 *Technique in Les Hommes contre l'humain*

Marcel introduces major concepts to illustrate this process of de-humanization through technique. The ones identified that relate most to Spiegelman's *Maus* are the following: the concept of 'free man', 'degradation techniques', 'propaganda', 'technical advancement', and 'pan-technicism'. All of these concepts form the core argument of Marcel and help in a specific reading on *Maus* focusing on technique, degradation and de-humanization.

3.1.1 *The concept of 'free man'*

In *Les Hommes contre l'humain*, Marcel starts by introducing the concept of a free man, so important for the existentialist movement of thought. According to Marcel, one is never free per se, in essence: only in a historical situation which one has to face, this freedom can be created and attested (Marcel 17). This positive definition of freedom - as a state that has to be enacted, and is not a mere possibility - is the core conception of existentialism. However, Marcel resorts to this conception of freedom in a different context than the main existentialists of his time: he argues that the contemporary man is going through a metaphysical crisis, mainly due to the growing role of technique in society, that only transcendence can save him from (Marcel 33). In other words, Marcel considers contemporary man as not being free and does not see any possibility for him to

⁸ *Nuit et Brouillard* is a documentary shot by Alain Resnais in 1955 and released in 1956. It is one of the first ones to expose images of extermination camps to the public sphere. It has also been subject to censorship from French authorities because it also portrays the responsibility of the French government in the Nazi crimes.

become free due to a basic existential anxiety. Human beings have lost a part of their humanness, something that prevents them of being free. Mankind is in agony and is about to destroy itself completely through the abuse of techniques and technologies it develops. An institutional or social adjusting would no be enough to soothe the worry of human beings. He concludes from that statement that the only way to escape this condition is to resort to religion, and to call for an order of the spirit that is also the one of grace (Marcel 23). According to Marcel, a man can be or stay free only if he remains linked to the transcendent. When resorting to transcendence, Marcel refers almost exclusively to God, as entity or concept that surpasses any qualifications that we could think of. This classical definition of transcendence as divine transcendence supposes a perfect independence between God and the created world. This transcendent is found for instance in the development of the genuine artist (Marcel 24). Two main dimensions are thus present in the Marcelian thought. An horizontal relation concerns the influence of technique and technology on human relations; it is thus the effect of human actions on human beings. A vertical dimension concerns this idea of transcendence as a reality that grounds our existence and confers meaning to it. A free man could only exist through the abstraction of the horizontal dimension to focus on the vertical one. Many common points between this concept and *Maus* appear, as it will be shown in the analysis part.

3.1.2 'Degradation techniques'

The introduction of degradation techniques is surely what makes Marcel's philosophy so unique in the studied text. As mentioned earlier, the cause of the metaphysical crisis humans are going through concerns the ever-growing role of technology and technique. Technique tends to fill the inner void of individuals, who do not perceive life as a divine gift anymore. Degradation techniques are the most harmful ones and used by human beings to destroy other human beings. Marcel describes them as "a whole body of methods deliberately put into operation in order to attack and destroy in human persons belonging to some definite class or other their self-respect, and in order to transform them little by little into mere human waste products, conscious of themselves as such, and in the end forced to despair of themselves, not merely at an intellectual level, but in the very depths of their souls" (Marcel 42). This definition constitutes a strong statement. These degradation techniques take different forms, and all of them are extreme. For the sake of the analysis, we will divide them into three main categories: the recourse to destructive human passions, isolation and bestialization. The first one concerns the exploitation of all the cowardices, blinds, jealousies and hatred inner to the human being. Isolation refers to the inducement to

delation, espionage in order to poison human relations to such an extent that even members of the family become enemies and demons. Bestialization, or de-humanization, is very related to the concentration camps established by the Nazi and is the fact of deliberately letting people die in their own grime in order to humiliate human dignity and to lower humans to beasts that and disgusted even by themselves. These three degradation techniques are essential in Marcel's discourse of describing the atrocities of the Holocaust. Marcel also denounces the vicious circle when a group of people resorts to those techniques; since the persecutors feel more and more powerful by degrading the victim, these techniques inevitably tend to generalize overtime. The more these techniques are applied, the less a way out seems to appear. The sense of revolt has completely vanished from victims' minds because of the condition and they are in and the feeling of guilt that surrounds them. Marcel once more makes a reference to religion and transcendence in this context: this situation has only been made possible because the ones using technique do not have any conscience of the sacred, and their actions is as a result close to the sacrilege. The cause of all this evil acts is the forgotten of the transcendence. These techniques are omnipresent in Spiegelman's portray of the Holocaust.

3.1.3 Propaganda as a result of technical progress

Propaganda is a specific technique also used to degrade the human being, but in a more subtle or less obvious way than the degradation techniques presented above. Marcel uses this example to prove that degradation techniques do not only concern extreme de-humanizing cases presented above, mainly applied in the context of war, but also concerns everyday life. Indeed, Marcel argues that the use of propaganda aims to reduce human beings at a condition in which they loose any capacity of individual reaction (Marcel 41). Propaganda makes use of the weaknesses of the victims in order to skillfully exploit them. The use of propaganda fits in the debate of technique because Marcel hints that technical progresses have promoted the manipulation of the propaganda to such an extent that it is now an incredibly powerful instrument. The role played by the radio in totalitarian regimes embodies this idea; its development has been so fast than it is now a serious threat to individual's integrity. Radio has acquired the privilege of ubiquity, and that in all current societies. This privilege of ubiquity should be reserved to the divine only. As such, the radio as an object symbolizes this replacement of spirituality and divinity by technique (Marcel 44). This technology can be used so powerfully that human beings do not feel an inner emptiness anymore, yet crucial for the relation with the divine. On another note, this point would apply nowadays to a whole other extend with the development of television, internet and social media. In the case of

Maus, propaganda is widely portrayed especially in the first volume not studied in this thesis. It plays however a crucial role in the development of the story and had to be mentioned here.

3.1.4 'Pan-technicism' and its influence on spiritual mischiefs

All the concepts presented above lead to an ultimate one that combine elements of each of them: 'pan-technicism' and its influence on spiritual mischiefs. Marcel argues that the contemporary man is shifting from a transcendent to a mere technical man. The abuse of technique leads the individual to forget the initial role of it: from a mean, it becomes an end, and, even worse, an idolatry. The man of technique has completely lost the conscious of himself to the profit of destructive power that he can not control (Marcel 56). He also lacks of integrity and authenticity because his everyday concerns are superficial. Even though technique can not be considered as intrinsically bad, the mankind has reached a non-return point where it is systematically misused. Technique tends to emancipate from knowledge and ends up challenging it, which eventually leads to a civilization that one could qualify of misosophy. The mystery is replaced by the problematic, and the concrete is replaced by the abstract. The conception of technique as an idol eventually tends to the perversion of the human being. The existentialist thoughts are here evident: the inner world - the world of being - is replaced by the world of objects and technique - the world of having (Marcel 56). This critic of consumerist societies is redundant in the existentialist debate. In *Maus*, even though there is no direct reference to spiritual or religion as a way to escape the insanities of the Nazis, this pan-technicism concept is still surprisingly present all throughout the text as we are going to see.

3.1.5 The question of responsibility

The question of responsibility is the last important aspect of *Les Hommes contre l'humain* that is essential to this research. Indeed, on the contrary to *Maus*, Marcel does not emphasize that the Nazis are the offenders, but rather technique itself. Nonetheless, Marcel specifies that "[it] is obvious that as soon as one begins to speak of techniques of degradation, one cannot help calling up for the reader in the first place the notion of the massive and systematic employment of such techniques with which the Nazis made us familiar, particularly in their concentration camps" (Marcel 41). A few pages later, he also refers to the Holocaust as the "most monstrous crime of history" (Marcel 44). However, there are less than ten occurrences of the word 'nazi' in the 273 pages that constitute the book. Instead of constantly blaming the Nazi Germany (without at the same time minimizing their acts), Marcel chooses to blame technique as a distinct entity and responsible of the human existential crisis. This parallel between the Nazi regime and technique is

an important aspect of the marcelian thought and constitutes one of the major differences with *Maus*. In the following analysis, we will not come back to this difference that will be considered as acquired.

On top of these main concepts emerges an idea that brings together many of them: the technicisation and instrumentalization of the human being, especially in the case of Auschwitz. The human being is not only used by the technique, but also used as a technique. At present, these concepts at the core of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy in *Les Hommes contre l'humain* will be applied to *Maus II*. This will be done by applying the above definitions to chosen passages of *Maus II* that are representative of the work as a whole. In light on the first chapter and of Barthes' definition of the discursive power of images, *Maus'* comic strips will be interpreted and commented upon as neutrally as possible.

3.2 *Maus* in relation to Gabriel Marcel's concepts

Vladek Spiegelman, as portrayed by his son in *Maus*, is left to his own devices all throughout his experience in the Auchswitz concentration camp. Even though he encountered many different characters that sometimes help him and that he is also subject to help, he is overall separated from his whole family and from his wife and forced to confront all the situations by himself. In this very specific context, freedom is a concept that is undeniably challenged. First of all, he does not enjoy any freedom of movement: he is imprisoned and forced to achieve tasks he did not choose. But his freedom of thoughts is also highly challenged. As it appears all along the second volume, Vladek's concerns were very primary and there was no room for any other thoughts than eating and sleeping. The degradation techniques as described by Marcel are omnipresent in *Maus*. It could be argued that any testimony of the Holocaust inevitably implies degradation technique, but the style of Spiegelman's drawing and storytelling fits especially within that framework. Indeed, by telling the experience of an individual rather than a group, this feeling of abasement through the general organization of the camp shows up even more powerfully. Physical, verbal and psychological violence is everywhere and impossible to escape between the capos and the prisoners but also amongst the prisoners themselves. The entire life of the prisoners is organized in a way that they feel guilty for no apparent reasons. When describing these degradation techniques, Marcel puts the emphasis on the conscious project of this organization: one who is degraded and de-humanized is not capable of any dangerous reactions anymore. Spiegelman, although its storytelling stays descriptive, depicts some extreme cases of degradation technique. The first important aspect that has to be noted and that was already mentioned previously is the use of

mice to draw Jewish people. Apart from the connotation of subordination that mice inspire, the fact of using animals instead of human faces goes in the sense of a de-humanization of the prisoners because of their conditions. The victims are perceived as animals barely capable of thinking because of the atrocities they endorse, and ironically tend to also behave that way because of they have to adapt to the situation they are put into. The style of Spiegelman puts the emphasis on the faces of the characters and on their attitudes to illustrate emotions. Alimentation becomes the object of all covetousnesses, as the character of Mandelbaum embodies at the beginning of Vladek's testimony. Mandelbaum, that was so well-off in his previous life, gets his spoon stolen because of the bread it represents. This example illustrates the lack of respect and integrity between the victims but also a system that encourages the prisoners to steal.



The character of Mandelbaum in *Maus*

Isolation as a consequence of delation appears already in the first volume of *Maus* not discussed in this thesis, where the family has to fly because they were denounced as Jews. That is surely one of the main components of the degradation techniques: even though the victims are enduring the same experiences, the pressure and suffering on their shoulders is so extreme that they can not trust anyone. As a primary organic feeling, hunger overcomes any forms of collaboration, and that was widely understood and used in the case of the concentration camps. Vladek is always threatened by delation of others, as when he starts working as a tin man and one of the prisoners, a former communist, accuses him of having exploited workers in his previous life. Even within the camp, were people were imprisoned because of their religion, ethnical belonging or political ideas, victims were subject to racism and threatened. In the two examples showed below, food is the motive of probable betrayal. In the first example, it is shown that a lack of soup could lead to

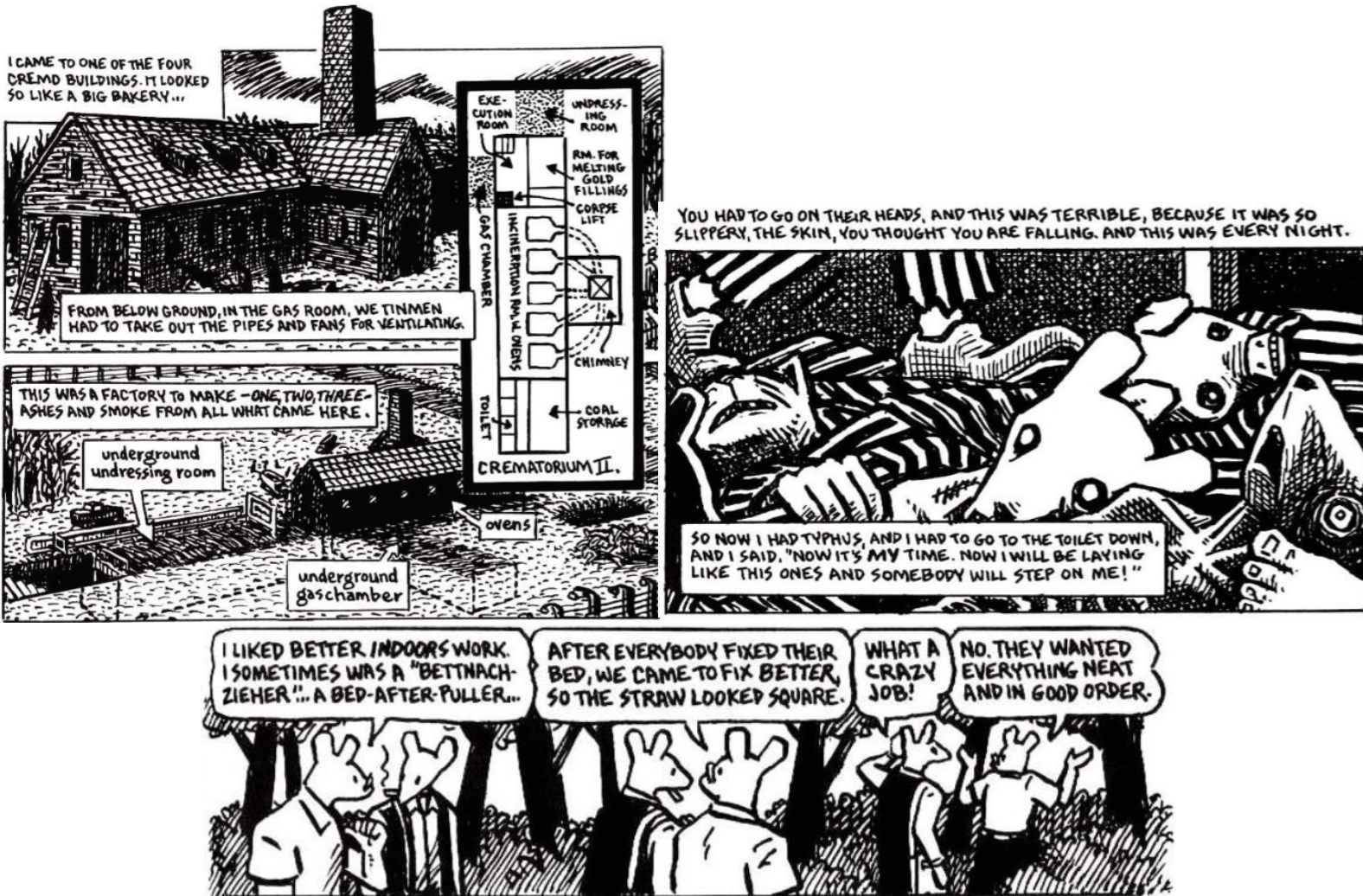
extremely violent fights. This shows the complete disassociation between the prisoners: even though they all are in the same situation, no solidarity nor sense of community exists amongst them. In the second example, Vladek succeeds to briefly work into the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp where his wife is and, having a very discreet discussion with her, he advises her not to trust anyone, again using the motive of food.



Examples of disassociation in *Maus* (91, 56)

In *Maus*, technique is also represented as a destructive mean. This is especially obvious when Vladek describes the functioning of the gas chambers in Auschwitz; by providing the outline of one, the abuse of technique appears as obvious. Indeed, and that are throughout his experience, technique is used against the victims as a way to optimize their killings. The third identified degradation technique in Marcel's text - what we called earlier the bestialization of human beings - is omnipotent in *Maus*. Marcel puts the emphasis on the order-disorder dialectic used by the Nazis in Auschwitz. In fact, even though there was an obsession for orders and rules that could not be trespassed at any moment, there was a general disorder inside the camp: victims were perishing in their own grime and excrements in the intention of lower and humiliate their human dignity. Spiegelman seems to put the emphasis on this dialectic as well. He clearly depicts Nazis as being obsessed by the respect of rules, by counting, and by an whole series of tools and means that go in the direction of a rational organization, whereas the inside of the camps is shown as total chaos and anarchy. Vladek has to obey any arbitrary order from the capos at any level of living: from working to eating and sleeping, but on the other hand, he is forced to live in a complete mess. It appears obvious that technique is used by human beings against human beings to an extreme level. This appears particularly obvious when Vladek is assigned to the job of 'Bettnachzieher' - 'bed-fixer' - as he had to fix and reorganize beds so that the dorms look square. As the character of Art underlines:

'What a crazy job' considering the amount of disorder and chaos present in the camp. An extreme sense of order had to cohabit with a complete chaos - that is the impression that prisoners had when arriving in Auschwitz.



order-disorder dialectic in *Maus* (70,95)

Another striking element appears when reading *Maus* in light of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy. It was underlined above that technique has an extremely negative connotation both in *Les Hommes contre l'humain* and in *Maus*. Human beings cannot resist technology's ever-growing influence and power. Nevertheless, that is what Vladek attempts to do in Auschwitz. Handicraftsman and ingenuity is what saves Vladek from a certain death. Surrounding by the mechanization of all activities and by the instrumentalization of the victims, he resorts to resources of artisanal craft. He firstly becomes a tin man (an activity that is impossible to organize in a work chain system), then a shoemaker (prototype of the artisanal activity since the Antiquity). The statement that he makes 'You see, it's good to know how to do everything' also goes at the opposite of the hyper-specialization required by technique. Vladek maintains at all costs the resources of

inventiveness and versatility, in his areas of interests as much as in his aptitudes. This is particularly true when he gets the idea of buying a second shirt to get an extra portion of food. In many ways, it is his technical ingeniousness that saves him from being killed or dying. That is also what differentiates Vladek from other weaker prisoners. All of the characters Vladek encounters in Auschwitz disappear as the story goes, except one. As a relation to Marcel, it can without any doubt be argued that Vladek attempted and more or less achieved, to resist the bestialization enforced by the Nazis in the concentration camps. He also resists the technologies and degradation techniques used by the Nazis. Nevertheless, his testimony reveals how his surrounding did not always have the mental and physical strength to do so.

As mentioned earlier, the only way out of de-humanization is, according to Marcel, the resort to divine transcendence. Even though Art Spiegelman apparently made a deliberate choice not to emphasize this aspect of Vladek's concerns in his graphic novel - which is also representative of the movement in which he started as a drawer - some elements still appear that demonstrate that Vladek's faith may have largely contributed to his survival. Indeed, his encounter with a priest at the beginning is what makes him stronger, and many times, references to his prayers are made. As a result, Vladek resorts to religion as a way to stay psychologically strong, but also as an act of rebellion to fight against the de-humanizing degradation techniques. Here, the vertical dimension present in the marcelian thought appears. Resorting to religion is indeed here a rebellion act: the degradation techniques are used in such a way that victims are not in a psychological condition that would allow us to think about transcendental questions. They pervert the human beings to such an extent that they are unable to think of something else than their basic needs. Marcel's philosophy appears to be extremely useful to put light on this aspect of Vladek's experience. Vladek, on the contrary of the other prisoners, succeeds to occupy his mind with other things than his immediate surrounding. This diversification of thoughts is what Marcel identifies as being one of the main challenges in a society led by technique.



Transcendence and religion in *Maus* (28)

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it seems that the two works under study relate more than they seem after the first lecture. The degradation techniques as introduced by Marcel help bringing a new understanding of *Maus*: the main enemies and culprits are of course the Nazis, but also and equally the use of technique and technologies as a whole. The Nazi means of oppression revolve around the (ab)use of technique, and that is in accordance with the reflexion of Gabriel Marcel in which technique is more accountable for the de-humanization of human beings than any specific actor. In *Maus*, the character of Vladek resists the abuse of technique by resorting to different processes. The return to artisanal activities is the first one, which correlates with Marcel's philosophy in the sense that the return to more natural or traditional things save him from being submissive to technique. The diversification of his interest points by resorting to transcendence is the second one. Vladek's religious beliefs save him from despair, which is also in accordance with the French philosopher that presents transcendence as being the only remedy to adverse effects of technique.

The use of Gabriel Marcel's *Les Hommes contre l'humain* in the reading of *Maus II* seems to be relevant from a philosophical and academic point of view. The forms of the graphic novel and of the

philosophical essay seem to be complementary in many ways: the concepts that the graphic novel tends to simplify by the use of drawings, the philosophical essay succeeds to develop in a more comprehensive and more finished form, and vice-versa. The thirty years separating the two works is noticeable first of all by the emphasis put on religion but also on the general tone of the work: Marcel represents the pessimism and negativism from the beginning of the 1950s, whereas Spiegelman has a more positive and optimistic tone representative of the early 1990s. At the time Marcel wrote his essay, images of concentration camps were mostly not accessible to the public sphere, and this element is striking in *Les Hommes contre l'humain*: the concentration camps are not detailed at all, at least not as accurately as in *Maus*. Nonetheless, even if a wide range of crucial details were still missing, Marcel's parallel between the Nazis and technique is impressively accurate and still up to date in modern societies. This parallel has influenced many and is mostly what Marcel is remembered for in the philosophical circle.

Besides, one of the most important contrasts between these two works resides in the tone: there is a certain detachment of Art Spiegelman from the Holocaust for the simple reason that he did not experience it directly. Even though this detachment is completely conscious and assumed by the author, it is striking to compare it with the way Marcel feels concerned about this issue in his writings. The latter are redacted almost in the form of a journal; here the author and narrator are entirely mingled, Marcel seems to write spontaneously following his thoughts.

Vladek's experience also shows that victims of concentration camps never really go out of these camps. In his whole life after his liberation, Vladek keeps living in a survival mode, always saving the tiniest things such as matches or gas. His son sadly presents him as having mentally integrated the order of things he was forced to adopt in Auschwitz and Dachau, which appears completely absurd to Art. In *Maus*, the degradation techniques function in a binding manner, the one who is de-humanized keeps a form of de-humanization all his life. To a certain extent, this aspect also correlates with Marcel's thoughts: describing transcendence as the only way to resist de-humanization can be perceived as a confession that nothing concrete or tangible could save the victim from his condition.

In this research, Gabriel Marcel's conceptualization of degradation techniques have allowed an elucidation of Spiegelman's interpretation of the Nazi crimes against the Jewish people. The substance of *Maus'* narrative has been analyzed using the main concepts of *Les Hommes contre l'humain*. In default of coming up with entirely new conclusions, this thesis brings up-to-date two major testimonies of a crime that humans beings are not allowed to forget. In light of recent events of racism worldwide, it seems that these researches and discussions are sadly still very much

needed. On top of contributing to this *duty of memory*, this paper also touches other sensitive topics such as the role of technique and technology in our live, and indirectly consumerism, topics that are equally more relevant than ever when looking at the current young generations, whose lives are driven, conducted and dominated by technologies.

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