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The Comic Book as Complex Narrative: Discursive Construction of Referential Truth in Art Spiegelman's Maus and Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis

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The Comic Book as Complex Narrative: Discursive Construction of Referential Truth in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the discursive construction of referential truth in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. I argue that referential truth is obtained through the inclusion of both correlative truth and metafictional self-reflection within a nonfictional work. Rather than detracting from their obtainment of referential truth, the comic book discourses of both *Maus* and *Persepolis* actually increase the degree of both referential truth and subsequent perceived nonfictionality. This paper examines the cognitive processes employed by graphic memoirs to increase correlative truth as well as the discursive elements that facilitate greater metafictional self-awareness in the work itself. Through such an analysis, I assert that the comic discourses of *Maus* and *Persepolis* increase the referential truth of both works as well as their subsequent perceived nonfictionality.
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Although comic books are often considered a lower medium of literary and artistic expression compared to works of literature, art, or film, modern graphic novels often challenge the assumption that such a medium is not capable of communicating complex and nuanced stories. Works such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi champion the realization of fully fleshed out narratives with emotional and literary depth—these graphic memoirs grapple with complex narratives born from tragedy in the Holocaust and the Iranian revolution. Instead of detracting from the power of their respective autobiographical or biographical stories, the comic book discourse—the vehicle comprised of both text and images in which the story or narrative itself is contained—of *Maus* and *Persepolis* often allow for greater communication of their stories as traditional textual discourse. In fact, I argue that as works of nonfiction dependent upon the reader’s perception and acceptance of the stories as corresponding to the events of objective reality and thus correspondently true, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* capitalize upon their nontraditional discursive representations to increase the degree of perceived nonfictionality contained within each of their respective narratives.

A work of nonfiction is dependent upon the degree to which its audience accepts its content as true; however, in works of representation the definition of truth proves to be complicated. I propose that nonfictional truth may be conceived of as a sliding scale with absolute correspondent truth one side and on the other, subjective relative truth. Correspondent truth, or the degree to which the story corresponds or aligns with objective reality, is generally expected if not outright demanded of any work of nonfiction. Should a nonfictional work deviate from representing a correspondent mimesis of events that occurred in objective reality established either through historical records, accurate
memory, or other means of verification, the work risks losing authority and nonfictional value. Although nonfictional works such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* must contain a high degree of correspondent truth, their very nature as representations renders the achievement of absolute correspondence between themselves and objective reality impossible. As representational devices, both text and image may construct a diegesis, or storyworld, that corresponds with objective reality, but a complete cohesion between story and reality without any differentiation between the two cannot exist.

Representational challenges particularly applicable to works of nonfiction include memory as a fallible device and the subjectivity of individual narration, both autobiographical and biographical. A nonfictional work that claims absolute correlative truth fails to recognize the inherent problems existent in representation that necessarily create a separation between the representational work and objective reality. However, on the opposite extreme of the scale, a work that engages in a hyperawareness of representational problems to such an extent as to dissolve all meaningful correlative truth is equally as fallible as a work that claims no such metareflection. An extreme acceptance of representational problems renders truth indiscernible from fabrication or lies guised under individual subjective interpretation. Thus nonfictional works must strike a balance upon a sliding scale of two extremes. I will argue that a nonfictional work gains the greatest possible degree of perceived nonfictionality through what I will refer to as referential truth—a kind of nonfictional truth achieved through the combination of both correlative truth elements and metafictional self-awareness of representational problems.

While some critics may argue that the comic book medium of works such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* detracts from their degree of referential truth, their discursive
duality of combining images and text actually increases their ability to contain elements of correspondent truth combined with metafictional self-awareness. Both *Maus* and *Persepolis* are nonfictional works that cannot be thoroughly understood solely in terms of the stories they contain, but also, by their very nature as graphic memoirs, through the visual discursive elements they contain. This paper will analyze the formal discursive elements of both *Maus* and *Persepolis* such as illustration, framing, panel organization, and the combination of visual and textual mediums to examine how their inclusion strengthens the referential truth of the works as a whole hence refuting the claims of a lack of seriousness in the medium.
Part One: Character Identification and Empathy in Images

As comic books, both Maus and Persepolis are drawn in the stylized minimalist method common to graphic novels, but not usually associated with realism and therefore correspondent truth. Despite this assumption, the illustrative and textual discursive duality in both Maus and Persepolis is used to create storyworlds complete with empathetic characters, immersive physical spaces, as well as the simulation of both movement and the passage of time. Maus and Persepolis attain such correspondent truth by employing formal discursive elements of illustration as well as panel separation, arrangement, and juxtaposition in combination with cognitive processes such as Theory of Mind and cognitive perceptual closure. By facilitating the representation of such correspondently complex diegetic worlds, the discursive properties of Maus and Persepolis allow both works to reflect high degrees of correspondent truth and subsequently greater audience-perceived nonfictionality.

In order to begin an analysis of how the illustrative discourse of both Maus and Persepolis facilitates the representation of empathetic characters, one must first have an understanding of the underlying cognitive process at work. Psychologists refer to The Theory of Mind (ToM) as an individual’s cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to oneself as well as others (Goldman 402). Through ToM, an individual recognizes his or her own consciousness and is therefore able to project himself or herself upon the consciousness of another to assume a motivation and agency for that individual. Essential for social engagement and interaction, ToM is physically evidenced by the base essential neurological process of mirror neurons. First observed in macaque monkeys, neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti attributed mirror neurons as essential to an individual’s
ability to simulate the mental state of another individual. Neurons in the macaque premotor cortex were seen to code for certain specific physical actions and were observed to fire both when the animal is planning to perform a distinctive action and when another animal (or human) performed the same action (Rizzolatti et al. 401). Later identified in humans as well, mirror neuron systems are necessary for mental simulation in which an individual predicts the actions or intentions of an individual by cognitively simulating themselves in a similar position—as reflected by the physical mimicry seen in mirror neurons (Goldman 413). The simulation of the mirror neural network is then compounded with other processes and conditioning, both social and neurological, culminating in the sophisticated human ToM projection that inspires the assumption of perceptions, emotional states, and propositional attitudes of another individual. Similarly, ToM results in greater empathetic connection with represented characters by facilitating reader projection and subsequent occupation of the character’s mental state (Oatley 16). By imposing agency, intention, and emotional consciousness upon a represented character, ToM proves crucial to the immersion of the reader into a diegetic storyworld and the subsequent construction of a correspondently true representation of social complexities, character identity, and emotional realities.

While Theory of Mind is applicable to textual representations, the empathetic immersive qualities of ToM are greatly enhanced by the illustrative discursive elements of *Maus* and *Persepolis* due to cognitive predisposition for facial recognition. As a function of neurological patternicity, a process of distinguishing a signal or pattern apart from the noise of other meaningless stimuli, the human brain is predisposed to instinctually look for and identify human faces. Cognitive neuropsychologist, Vincent de
Gardelle, conducted a study on perceptual consciousness in infants and found that two black dots on a cardboard cutout elicit both a physical response (a smile) and a neurological reaction in infants, while one dot does not (378-379). The study indicates that the newborn brain is preconditioned by evolution to look for and find the simple pattern of a face represented by two to four data points: two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, which may even be represented as two dots, a vertical line, and a horizontal line. Such distilled fundamentals of facial recognition allows for an individual to interpret a simple ink illustration as a face closer to that seen in objective reality than a face textually represented. Textual representations of faces may be equally understood as illustrative depictions, but the written word remains the farthest dissemination of representation from reality in comparison with illustrative representations. While the lettered word “face” and ink illustrations are both symbolic representations, the cognitive process of facial recognition establishes a greater degree of correspondent truth in character face perception than textual representation alone.

The combination of facial recognition and the projection of the self through the processes of Theory of Mind allow the illustrative discourses of graphic novels to solicit a high degree of correspondent truth as the characters are imbued with agency, intention, and emotional resonance that reflect the experience of objective reality. The illustrations of both *Maus* and *Persepolis* not only capitalize upon the cognitive processes previously described, but also augment the immersive benefits by depicting their stories in a stylized minimalist manner. Cartoonist and comic book theorist Scott McCloud conceives of a sliding scale between realism and iconography in which representation can be placed—textual representation (words) or non-pictorial symbols on the farthest extreme of
iconographic meaning and photography or realism artwork at the extreme of reality. The more stylized an illustration in graphic novels, the closer it slides towards iconographic meaning and is thus transformed from a mimesis of reality to a symbolic representation (McCloud 31). Through the distillation of an image to its essential meaning as a symbol, using abstraction and stylization in the cases of *Maus* and *Persepolis*, the fairly minimalist illustration facilitates an amplification of the symbol’s meaning by sacrificing the specificity of realism for greater universal application. A realistic image can only be interpreted as singular and is therefore obligatorily conceived of as separate or other. Conversely, the stylized imagery of *Maus* and *Persepolis* allows for greater identification with the characters due to the absence of concrete details that construct unique individuality. Instead, the characters of *Maus* and *Persepolis* assume a symbolic status due to their minimalistic representation in which they gain greater universal application for identification with any individual. The stylized rendering of the illustrations allows readers to immerse themselves more completely within the diegesis of the graphic novels and therefore exhibit greater empathy and resonance with the story itself.

Consider the following panel from *Persepolis*:

![Fig. 1. Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) 134. Print.](image)
The characters within this panel are notable for their simplistic rendering that places them firmly within the realm of cartoon iconography. The figures are stylized and the faces rendered only with the barest suggestion of features. The faces of the two women are drawn with minimal lines and mask-like simplicity emphasizing their interchangeability as faceless authoritative figures or representative of a multitude of oppressive characters. The women’s bodies are drawn in dynamic black shapes curving over the central character to reinforce their intimidating presence. Overall, the women are not drawn as objectively realistic but rather are represented in a stylized minimalist manner that distills the image into the symbolic cartoons essential for communicating the emotional reality of the story itself. Furthermore, the face of the child is drawn with exaggerated circular eyes that objectively do not provide any correspondent truth to the anatomical structure of a child’s face, but the minimalist iconographical depiction facilitates a more universal identification with the character and thus a greater emotional empathic response. Due to cognitive facial recognition and ToM, the symbolic iconography is read as the face of a frightened child opposed to the mask-like dominance of two overbearing figures above her. The audience recognizes the face and identifies with the character by projecting their own conscious agency and imbuing the represented figure with emotional intelligence. The iconographic comic visual language in this frame of Persepolis exemplifies how greater correspondent truth may be achieved through the seeming distortion or distillation of objective reality into illustration. An entirely correspondently true representation of objective reality is impossible, yet through stylized iconographic illustration, the discourses of both Maus and Persepolis transcend realistic depiction to capture
correspondently true representations of character agency, propositional attitudes, and emotional realities.

Though cognitive processes combined with stylized comic illustrative technique creates immersive storyworlds complete with correspondent interpersonal emotional experience rather than realistic depiction, the visual discourse of Maus seemingly goes another step farther in its separation from mimetic representation. More so even than Persepolis, Maus separates its illustrative style from correspondently realistic representation by depicting its characters as personified animals. Instead of rendering the reality of the storyworld trite in comparison to the holocaust and detracting from the correspondent truthfulness of the work as a whole, the use of personified animals constructs a metaphor to represent unfathomable and otherwise unrepresentable truths of genocide. Many of the events of the Holocaust are so extreme in their horrors that they are rendered into a kind of catachresis, unrepresentable through words or images directly, only approachable through a metaphorization of the events themselves. Metaphor creates greater understanding of one subject in terms of another—thus the indefinable experience of surviving the Holocaust is granted greater definition in its metaphorical representation rather than a literal testament. In the case of Maus, the animal personification of characters allows for greater certainty in grasping the unfathomably alien atrocities of the Holocaust by defining it in terms of a metaphor that the reader is better equipped to understand—the oft referenced relationship between cat and mouse. Through the utilization of animalization, the metaphor assists the reader’s conceptualization of events described by stripping away lingering referential details of reality that have become familiar and desensitizing. The overexposure of realistic imagery results in its lack of
power to accurately communicate the reality of the Holocaust, consequently, *Maus* reconstructs reality through symbolic language and a dependence upon the semantic connotations pertaining to cats and mice. The cat is aggressive, predatory, and violent, while the mouse is hunted, frightened, and victimized. Rather than resulting in the distillation of the holocaust into flat symbols, the use of animal imagery opens new avenues for identification and understanding of horrific violence through the diminutive. Through symbolic iconography and metaphor, the formal discursive choice to use personified animals results in a more correspondently true representation of reality.

Furthermore, animal imagery in *Maus* becomes a literalization of genocidal stereotypes highlighting the absurdity of the categorization of human race into different “species.” As Hitler stated, “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human,” (Spiegelman 3). Jews in the third Reich were animalized (usually as rats or “vermin”) to such an extent that they were viewed as subhuman or pertaining to an entirely different understanding of humankind. Such a racist and ultimately genocidal stereotype is not simply manifested within subtext or as a central theme of the work, but through Spiegelman’s formal artistic choices. The use of personified animals is therefore a literalization of a metaphor that obliges the reader to more fully grasp the blatant racism inherent in Vladek’s experiential reality. More specifically, the formal discursive choice to depict the characters as animals is an indirect inclusion of correspondent truth by depicting Vladek’s objective reality consumed with the racial stereotype, segregation, and genocide of the Holocaust. The visual metaphor consequently results in a more accurate and thus correspondently true representation of the story the discourse contains.
Consider the following excerpt:

![Cartoon panels showing a character transforming from mouse to cat](image)


When the same character transforms from mouse to cat as a symbolic representation of his changing perceived racial identity, the illustrations reinforce the spurious nature of racial classification. The same character is depicted as two animal species based solely upon the perception of the others around him—the mouse to the German soldiers and the cat as a reflection of his own assertions and others’ uncertainty. Obviously, the character is not changing species, but is a victim of racist segregation and oppression consequently highlighting the ridiculous nature in which race division is a societal construction entirely dependent upon the perceptions of others and the self, not as a predetermined factor of an individual’s identity. By communicating the absurd racist reality of Vladek’s experience, the use of literal metaphor allows *Maus* to represent Vladek’s reality with greater correspondent truth than possible through a more mimetic depiction.

The cartoon iconography used in illustration does not render graphic memoir less effective in representing correlative truth. Instead, as seen in the identification and
personification of illustrated figures and the construction of visual metaphor, cognitive processes of ToM and face recognition compounded with simplistic minimalist style drawings allow *Persepolis* and *Maus* to achieve a high degree of correspondent truth. Through the ability to inspire complex emotional responses and greater universal identification as well as create symbolic iconography to communicate further information and construct literal metaphors of unrepresentable events, the use of stylized illustration and comic iconography proves essential in the establishment of greater perceived nonfictionality contained within the discourses of both *Maus* and *Persepolis*. 
Part Two: Representing Space, Time, and Movement

The intentional dilution of the character depiction towards iconographic representation rather than realistic representation of objective reality increases the emotional, subjective, or experiential aspects of correspondent truth rather than the correspondent sensorial objective reality—that which is actually seen, heard, and touched in physical reality. In order to construct a more correspondently truthful representation of reality, the discursive illustrations of both *Maus* and *Persepolis* include the physical environments in which the story takes place. The representation of the background surroundings of reality, or world-building, is particularly effective in visual representations in graphic novels due to the cognitive process of cognitive perceptual closure. According to cognitive neuropsychologists, Joan Gay Snodgrass and Hikari Kinjo, cognitive perceptual closure is the process whereby incomplete stimulus is perceived to be complete. Such a cognitive phenomenon is a result of mentally completing the fragmented and incomplete perceptions of our physical senses based upon past experience (645). Similar to our cognitive predisposition to perceive a face in rudimentary symbols, closure allows the reader to complete an entire background, city, or landscape from the suggestion of a single comic panel. Through perceptual closure, the discourses of *Maus* and *Persepolis* are able to reconstruct physical spaces correspondent to physical reality and occupied by both the historical events as well as the characters contained within the respective stories. Cognitive perceptual closure is used particularly within *Maus* to represent highly recognizable correspondent spaces such as Auschwitz internment camp. Spiegelman depicts only fragments of the actual space in juxtaposed
panels, yet through cognitive closure, the reader is able to reconstruct a more complete understanding of the physical space as a whole.

Consider the following panel from *Maus II: And Here my Troubles Began*:

![Maus II panel](image)


When Vladek arrives at Auschwitz, the illustration depicts only the infamous gate and relies upon the suggestion of further buildings to imply the camp as a whole. This image utilizes two elements of cognitive closure with which the reader world-builds the physical space in correspondence with reality: the inclusion of accurate representations of actual spaces existing in reality as well as the reliance upon the reader’s processing the single
pane as indicative of a more complete environment. Spiegelman chooses to introduce Auschwitz by representing the gate—an instantly recognizable icon of Auschwitz and the Holocaust at large—in a stylized fashion rather than in mimetic photorealism. By drawing the surrounding environment in a stylized manner including actual physical details corresponding to those occupying objective reality (the gate, the truck, the guards, etc.), the panel facilitates the employment of cognitive perceptual closure as the reader uses their previous knowledge of the texture, color, and material to fill in the missing sensorial details. By inviting greater audience participation and thus immersion into the completion of the image, cognitive closure transforms the single panel fragment into an entire physical environment complete with tangible sensorial details and that extends out past the confines of the panel borders to become a mimetic reconstruction of the correspondent physical space of experiential reality.

Cognitive closure is further implemented as a world-building device in both Maus and Persepolis to populate the storyworld and thus achieve greater degrees of perceived nonfictionality through correspondent truth. Cognitive closure not only contributes to the construction of the storyworld through the mimetic representation of physical spaces, but in the case of Persepolis, allows for the representation of a massive historical event only possible to depict in fragments.

Consider the following passage:
When Satrapi depicts a protest of 2 million people in Tehran in *Persepolis*, she relies on cognitive closure to construct a representation of both the amount of people and the historical event itself in a single panel. As the text describes, two million people protested in Tehran, however fewer than 30 people are actually depicted in the illustration. Instead of attempting to draw the event in its entirety, cognitive closure allows for a fragmented illustrative representation supplemented by textual context to symbolize the whole. The reader is obliged to magnify the scale of the original fragment of protesters illustrated to the actual number of protesters to construct a more correspondently true representation of the event. By constructing such a physical space, the illustrative discourse of *Persepolis* builds a storyworld that not only corresponds to the events in reality, but also better immerses the reader into the physical space of the event itself. Had Satrapi depicted a greater number of people, the reader would be less likely to identify and empathize with the individual faces. By way of cognitive perceptual closure, the image still manages to represent a massive crowd without risking disassociating the reader from immersing themselves within the diegesis through empathetic connection with individuals. Similar
to *Maus*, the discourse of *Persepolis* uses cognitive closure to realize a more complete representation of correspondently true historic events and physical spaces, thus better establishing the nonfictionality of the stories themselves.

While perceptual cognitive closure increases the nonfictionality of the works when implemented in illustrative discourses by facilitating a more complete construction of correspondent physical spaces and events of objective reality, the process may also contribute to other important factors of world-building in both *Maus* and *Persepolis*: specifically the representation of the passage of time and movement. As a discursive medium comprised of juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence, the graphic novel is a particularly adept vehicle for the conveyance of motion and representing the passage of time. Similar to film, graphic novels use individual frames set in sequential order to depict the story. However, in film, closure occurs continuously and due to humans’ involuntary persistence of vision, the series of still pictures transforms into a story of continuous motion. Graphic novels instead must rely upon collaboration between reader and discourse because closure between frames is discontinuous and therefore voluntary. Each panel of a graphic novel is separated by white space called “the gutter” in which nothing is depicted. As Scott McCloud explains, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). The gutter between panels obliges the reader to draw upon previous experience to fill in the blank space and connect each panel as a continuous scene—effectively employing cognitive closure to represent motion and the subsequent passage of time.
Through the sequential juxtaposition of individual frames separated by the gutter, graphic novels require a high degree of closure that reconstructs an entire scene from just a few picture fragments. The consequence of such communication of movement and passage of time unique to the graphic novel medium is the obligation to perceive time spatially—time and space become very closely linked within the discursive construction. Due to cognitive closure, the passage of time is most often represented in comics by presenting each panel the reader currently reads as the present and the panel ahead is then the future. Wherever the readers’ eyes are focused is perceived as the present and the surrounding landscape as the past and future. As the reader moves spatially along the page, he or she also moves in time. If each panel is depicted as a moment in time, then the gutter between each panel may occupy any length of time from one panel to the next. The transitions between panels often dictate how much time has passed spanning from moment-to-moment transitions that require very little closure between panels to scene-to-scene transitions that require greater closure because the juxtaposed panels may transport the reader between significant distances of time and space. By lending spatiality to time, the reader is obliged to experience the passage of time in the story events themselves as part of the very act of the story narration. Unlike a purely textual discourse in which the narration often has little correlation with story time, each transition of panels in a comic book discourse obliges the reader to experience the passage of time between one story moment and another. Thus the discourses of *Maus* and *Persepolis* represent the passage of time as the reader moves through the juxtaposed panels and represented story, lending greater dimensionality to the diegetic storyworld and representing a more correspondently true experience of the role of time in the story narration and occurrence.
Since the transition and space between juxtaposed sequential panels holds such importance in the depiction of time, the panel itself must also be an important indicator of time as the general divider of diegetic space or time. The shape of the panel itself may influence the amount of perceived time occupied in the spatial confines of the panel itself. Consequently, if an individual panel is longer than its adjacent panels, it is often read as taking place over a longer amount of time due to the perceived spatiality of time in graphic novels. Similarly, a variation in panel size may be used to manipulate both diegetic time and reading time in order to emphasize a single point of action.

Furthermore, the actual contents of an individual panel may not take place over the course of a single instance, but actually take place in a temporal sequence. In such a case, single panel may employ cognitive closure without the separation of gutters to create a chronological sequence of events. Readers have a propensity to impose a narrative upon a static image—granting any recognizable subject a motivation, intention, or action.

According to narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott, the process of granting a story to a static image is called narrativizing (6). In the case of Maus, the discourse includes paratextual images that stand apart from the sequential juxtaposition of the other panels, but contain high degrees of narrative within themselves alone.

The following is a paratextual passage taken from Maus:
Despite the lack of supporting adjacent panels, the single image immediately communicates a narrative to the viewer. The reader doesn’t interpret the image as static, but instead looks for a story to complete and explain the image itself. As Abbott says, “this human tendency to insert narrative time into static, immobile scenes seems almost automatic, like a reflex action. We want to know not just what is there, but also what happened” (7). Similar to cognitive perceptual closure, the process of narrativizing employs the reader’s memory, experience, and preconceived narrative formulas to complete the narrative of a single panel. Thus a story may be read in any single panel even without the juxtaposition of continuing narrative panels as found in the comic book discourse. Such isolated narrativization and closure greatly increases the perceived sensorial, temporal, and world-building details in the work as a whole because while each panel is capable of containing a narrative alone, the effects are only increased when the panel is placed in deliberate sequential narrative order with other panels.

Directly related to the cognitive closure process of representing time through the juxtaposition of sequential panels, is the representation of movement. Motion may be communicated spatially in the discursive construction of the graphic novel similar to the representation of time. Each panel depicts a single fragmented instance of an action and then in juxtaposition, the sequence represents the entire completed action. Cognitive perceptual closure interprets the sequential presentation of fragments as continuous motion in time and space. Yet another method of representing motion is objectively more static in its occupation of space—often only occupying a single panel. In order to imply movement, the artist suggests motion blur with diagrammatic motion lines that follow the path of objects moving through space. Such a method of motion communication requires
more cognitive closure as only a single fragment of the event is represented in which to extrapolate the entirety of movement sequence. *Maus* and *Persepolis* employ both styles of motion representation as facilitated through the process of cognitive closure.

As already discussed, the comic book medium is dependent upon voluntary and discontinuous cognitive closure to transform fragmented illustrations into a more correspondently true representation of reality. From a sequence of juxtaposed panels, the reader transforms the individual fragments into a continuous scene complete with correspondently true physical spaces, the passage of time, and movement, thus facilitating a greater degree of perceived nonfictionality through the discourse itself. In fact, the process of cognitive closure is so powerful as to reconstruct or complete sensorial details only suggested in a purely mono-sensorial medium (vision). For example, a conversation between two characters may take place over the course of a entire panel grid sequence, yet the reader perceives the scene as if it occurred without interruption, hearing voices in the mind rather than perceiving them as visual input, and occupying an actual physical space complete with other sensorial or objective details.

Consider the following scene in *Persepolis*:
Each panel depicts a static scene in which the figures are depicted in a single instance of their total narrative; however, due to the process of cognitive closure, the sequence is not viewed as separate instances, but as a seamless progression. In the gutter space, the mind of the reader substitutes the blank space with the intermediary action in time that occurs between each panel—thus representing as close as possible the uninterrupted flow of time, dialogue, and motion as it would be experienced in correspondent reality. The result is a continuous scene in which the dialogue from one panel flows without pause or continues into the following panel with no perceived gap. Since the gutter contains no
sensory information, cognitive closure fills it with every required sensory detail to complete the scene in its entirety. As the sequence progresses, the last two panels offer an example of how cognitive closure both facilitates greater world-building as both panels depict only a fragment of a greater reality as well as how juxtaposed panels suggest movement and action. The last two frames depict fewer than ten people, however, the closeness of the figures’ depiction compounded with the reader’s own experiential knowledge of protests facilitates a cognitive closure process in which the entire crowd in the physical space is reconstructed. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the upright depiction of the figures in the first panel of the second row against the dynamic pitch of the figures in the second image implies movement. The reader “fills in” the gaps in time in the spatial gutter between the two frames and so the figures appear to move despite their obviously static illustration. Through such a combination of physical space representation, the perceived passage of time, and the illusion of movement, cognitive closure facilitates the construction of a diegesis or storyworld that is more correspondently true to objective reality.

As a juxtaposed sequential medium, the discourse of comic books is necessarily dependent upon the process of cognitive closure to transform single panels into a cohesive, almost cinematic, diegesis of physical spaces, time, and movement. While film may seem similar to if not more advanced than comics in its use of cognitive perceptual closure, the involuntary continuity between film frames renders the medium more passive than comic discourse that requires voluntary discontinuous use of cognitive perceptual closure. The separation between each comic panel forces the reader to engage in the discourse and fill in the missing perceptual information. Through cognitive perceptual
closure, single frames expand to connect seamlessly with the next panel in an uninterrupted experience rich in sensorial details—sound, texture, even smell—extrapolated from only visual input. Without cognitive closure, comics could not contain near the amount of narrative detail and in the cases of *Maus* and *Persepolis*, degree of correspondent truth and resulting perceived nonfictionality.

Beside panel juxtaposition, the other defining discursive element of the comic book medium is the use of both text and image together to express the narrative. Traditionally, words and images occupy opposite ends of a communication spectrum in which one, pictures, are a vehicle of resemblance, and the other, words, are a medium of meaning. Comics such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* use the combination of words and images not only to construct the narrative, but also to express complex ideas and emotional subtleties better represented than through words or images alone.
Part Three: Words and Images

When considering the relationship between words and art, one might consider the two methods of communication to be polar opposites of one another—one concerned with expressing not just details of the world but also invisible meaning such as senses, emotions, spirituality or philosophy, while the other serves as a vehicle with which to depict resemblance, light, color, and all things visible. However, since the late 19th century, artistic movements such as abstraction moved art away from strict correspondent representation or resemblance and towards ideas and meaning. Similarly, 19th century poetry movements championed by authors such as Walt Whitman turned poetry away from illusive twice-abstracted language toward a more direct, even colloquial, style. Words too began to encompass not only their traditional position of ideas and meaning but also migrate toward the realm of resemblance. The comic discursive medium stands in between these two movements—its artwork gaining representative meaning to express the emotion, mood, and tone of the story while the words slightly compromise their communication of the purely invisible to work alongside the images. The successful use of both textual and visual discourses together renders comic books able to communicate complex narrative ideas—a key characteristic that facilitates greater perception of nonfictionality within both Maus and Persepolis.

As previously discussed, the illustrative style of comic book discourse often relies upon the simplification and stylization of images to move away from a singular representation and toward a more inclusive universal application that invites the reader to project themselves upon the character to generate greater empathy with the story itself. Such transcendence into the realm of iconography exemplifies how the art of comic
books often lies in the intersection between pure correspondent resemblance and iconographic, almost linguistic meaning. Yet, the stylization of character depiction is not the only instance of the use of symbols or icons within comic discourse. Consider the group of wavy lines used to represent smoke burning from Art’s cigarette in *Maus*. The wavy lines represent a visible phenomenon by way of a visual metaphor or symbol. Similarly, wavy lines are drawn over corpses in *Maus II* to represent smell, an invisible phenomenon only illustratable through the use of abstract visual symbols. Over time, comics have developed a lexicon of accepted symbols that allow the illustrations to communicate often invisible sensorial information such as sound and smell as well as emotional states through symbols such as light bulbs and sweat beads. Together, these visual symbols generate greater communication of correspondently true sensorial information as well as lend greater insight into the invisible emotional states of the character—creating a more immersive diegesis because the symbols are so instantly recognizable.

Beyond the use of visual metaphor or symbols, the illustration of comic books may also be used to further reveal emotional subtleties by way of synesthetic visualization of invisible emotional states. An expressive illustration complete with emotive lines, texture, or pattern often elicits strong emotional reactions that produce an almost physiological effect that the reader then attributes to the characters of the story themselves. The styles in which the comic illustrations are drawn often serve to establish the tone and mood of the story’s atmosphere. In the case of both *Maus* and *Persepolis* the physical nature of the illustrative lines in the images better serve to represent the invisible, often catachresis-like timbre in a scene depicting what would otherwise be
difficult if not impossible to express through text with the same immediate emotional clarity and charge received through artwork. However, while images can induce strong emotional responses in reader, they can also lack the specificity of words often required in narrative construction.

Although words in the comic book medium often do not communicate the same immediacy of emotion as does art, they do offer a specificity of communication through a more gradual cumulative effect. Unique to the comic discourse, graphic novels utilize language in a variety of ways in juxtaposition with illustration to tell the story it contains. Comic books may use a word-specific combination in which the text is the primary narrative device where pictures illustrate, but don’t significantly add to a largely complete text. Moreover, a narration primarily driven by images—a picture-specific combination—uses words like a voiceover further narrating an already established visual sequence. Other combinations may include duo-specific panels in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message or additive combination in which words serve to amplify or elaborate on an image (McCloud 154). The most effective frames in both *Maus* and *Persepolis* are those that implement an interdependent combination where words and pictures are enacted in a mutually beneficial or supportive fashion to better convey an idea that neither medium could have communicated alone. The image may provide the necessary emotional charge or necessary establishment of physical world space, but words themselves, more than all the other visual symbols, have the power to describe the invisible realm of senses and emotions with the greatest specificity. Consequently, through the combination of visual immediacy and textual specificity, the discursive combination of imagery and language in comic books facilitates a greater
communication of emotional and sensorial complexity with more clarity of expression within the storyworld it also constructs than a single medium alone.

Consider the following passage from *Maus*:

![Fig. 7. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 101. Print.](image)

Within this excerpt, Spiegelman uses expressive, violent lines to evoke the feelings of terror, confusion, and pain in his readers. The harsh contrast between the black and white compounded with the erratic grit of the illustration serves to further communicate the intensity and overwhelming nature of Spiegelman’s loss. The images communicate the emotional state of the protagonist with immediate force—the raw emotional resonance of this panel is instantly beheld and understood by the reader. With the addition of words, the excerpt increases in specificity as “She’s dead A suicide!” lend clarity and meaning to the narrator’s emotion. Juxtaposed against the visceral immediacy of the images, the words lend greater breadth of understanding and reason to the scene by explaining
context and providing the necessary background for the reader’s full emotional empathy. Thus, through the dualistic use of both text and imagery, Spiegelman is better able to represent the physical and emotional reality of experiencing his mother’s suicide.

When images convey the emotion, tone, or mood of a work with visceral immediacy and the text complements the narrative by clarifying the latent, the discourse of graphic novels actually allows for greater representation of complex and subtle emotional, psychological, or ideological truths found in objective reality. By capitalizing upon the representational strengths of two mediums—stylized iconographic art and text—the respective discourses of *Maus* and *Persepolis* allow for a more correspondently true representation of their nonfictional stories. By using two vehicles of communication, graphic novels construct the following: complex storyworlds complete with characters readied for reader identification and empathy; physical spaces, time, and motion as realized through cognitive closure; and a detailed landscape of characters’ invisible internal realities. In other words, the duality of graphic novels’ discursive structure allows the medium to represent the highly complex nature of objective reality with a greater degree of correspondent truth that what would perhaps be possible through other narrative methods such as film and prose fiction and nonfiction. As graphic novels, the discursive properties of *Maus* and *Persepolis* increase their degree of perceived nonfictionality by containing greater correspondent truth. However, as previously articulated, a work’s perceived nonfictionality cannot be entirely dependent upon its attempt to represent correspondently true reality due to the problems inherent in the separation between representational discourse and objective reality. Instead, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* separate themselves from purely correspondent truth to address their own
subjective and problematic natures as representational discourses. While such metafictional self awareness might prove damaging to nonfictional perception by dangerously sliding towards a purely subjective understanding of truth with no correlative basis in historical or objective reality, its use in *Maus* and *Persepolis* proves to key to both works’ reflection of a more referential truth and thus achievement of greater perceived nonfictionality of the works as a whole.
Part Four: Memory as Problematic in Representation

While purely correspondent truth cannot exist because of the inherent separation between representation and reality, the adoption of a too self-aware metafiction is equally as destructive to perceived nonfictionality within a work. A work that becomes hyper-aware of itself as representation risks losing any contained correlative truth relating to objective or historical reality in its representation of an entirely isolated subjective experience. In such a work, truth becomes entirely relative to individual experience and does not necessarily bare any direct connection between its narrative and objectively true events of reality. In other words, the nonfictionality of a work loses all credibility as the expectation of correlative truth contract between the reader and nonfictional work is broken—resulting in the reader’s perception of the work as fictional, or worse, as a lie.

Consequently, *Maus*’ and *Persepolis*’ self-recognition of their representational problems should result in the deconstruction or devaluing of their respective nonfictionality; however, perhaps paradoxically, the discursive devices included in both *Maus* and *Persepolis* designed to draw attention to themselves as representations actually result in increased perceived nonfictionality. As previously discussed, perceived nonfictionality balances on a sliding scale between an attempt at pure correspondent truth at one end and metadiscursive subjectivity on the other—through a combination of these two approaches, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* are able to express referential truth and thus greater perceived nonfictionality.

By their very nature as works reflecting correspondent reality, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* inherently contain representational problems derived from their reliance upon memory as well as the necessity to focalize through a subjective narrator’s own
Beckler

experiential interpretation and reconstruction of the narrative events. *Maus* and *Persepolis* capitalize on their discursive use of both text and visuals in narrative construction to draw attention to the representational problems and in doing so, highlight the irreconcilable separation between themselves as works of representation and the reality they depict. While such metafictional self-awareness may have undermined the perceived nonfictionality of the works, the recognition of the problems inherent to representation actually bolsters the nonfictionality of both works by acknowledging the impossibility of true correlative truth. Through their acceptance that as works of nonfiction, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* will never achieve an absolute direct correlative reality, they lend credibility to their other representational efforts to reconstruct objective reality as depicted in their stories. By striking a balance between attempts at correlative truth in representation and self-awareness of their own attempt as inherently problematic, *Maus* and *Persepolis* reflect referential truth and therefore achieve an authenticity that results in the increased perception of nonfictionality of the works themselves.

As autobiographical or biographical works, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* are obliged to rely heavily upon memory to reconstruct their story events—here the first problem is encountered. Such a dependency upon memory for an accurate reconstruction of supposed objective events of reality places both *Maus* and *Persepolis* in precarious positions because of the often fallible nature of memory itself. Memory, at the neurological level, does not exist in a permanent state of stored information, but is instead almost entirely reconstructed each and every time a memory is recollected. As Antonio Damasio states in “The Hidden Gifts of Memory,” “The brain forms memories in a highly distributed manner. Take, for instance, the memory of a hammer. There is no
single place in our brain where you can hold the record for hammer” (Damasio 281).
Instead, memories are formed in a highly distributed manner drawing information from many sensorial, lingual, or intellectual understandings of a certain event formed in many, often disparate, locations in the brain (Damasio 281). When a memory is recalled, it must be generated afresh as a new construct of the past. If memory is reconstructed, it must therefore be subject to the unique circumstances and experiential knowledge of the individual in the instant of the memory’s recollection. Each new memory must be reconstructed according to the present interpretations, autobiographical knowledge, and general experience of the individual and is consequently shaped and influenced according to these varying factors. Ultimately, every memory is a recollection of the past as reconstructed through the reality of the individual in the present.

Compounding upon the necessity of present influences upon the formation of memory in its recollection, the resulting subjectivity of memory predisposes it to manipulation by external influences. Memory does not passively record life and then allow an individual to access the information in its unaltered original state. Instead, memory, and the reconstruction of the autobiographical self in general are processes of revision and reinterpretation of the past. New details, complete knowledge of all events, hindsight, and a desire to impose causal narrative structure all may contribute to the general revision and reconstruction of memory. Memory proves so corruptible that individuals may adopt memories of events that the individual never witnessed or the memories of others as their own at the mere suggestion of having experienced an occurrence—these so called confabulated memories are indistinguishable from the memories of events that an individual truly experienced within objective reality.
(Moscovitch 227). Consequently, the formation of memory and subsequent construction of the autobiographical self often proves to be a process less of objective accuracy than of subjective formulation.

For a source oft taken to be the definitive method of determining correlative truth within the narrative of a work of nonfiction, memory is precariously unreliable in comparison with the historical record of objective reality. However, this is not to say that memory does not contain correlative truth in its reflection of objective reality, but rather that its failure to obtain directly correlative truth must be addressed in works of a genre dependent upon the expectation of memory as an objective source of historical fact. By refusing to ignore the representational problems posed by memory, both Maus and Persepolis more completely reconcile themselves as works of representation and as such, communicate a more complete truth of representational reality. In the case of Maus and Persepolis, the problems inherent to memory are explored through not only the stories themselves, but also through the physical discursive organization and presentation of the panels as well.

Of the two nonfictional works, Maus is much more aggressive in its acknowledgement and further exploration of the representational challenges posed by the problematic processes of memory. From the very first pages, author Art Spiegelman introduces a deliberate juxtaposition between the depictions of the diegetic present and past. The clear separation of the two diegetic narrative levels consisting of Spiegelman and Vladek’s present and Vladek’s past visually emphasizes the difference between the narrative as it is happening and the narrative as it is remembered.

See Figure 8 as an example:
The first seven panels of this passage are rendered in a fairly traditional square panel construction with only slight variation in size and proportion of each panel. Furthermore, each successive panel transitions moment by moment with no significant jump either temporally or spatially within the diegetic narrative space. Such a narrative construction invites the reader into a causal linearity that mimics the direct immediacy of the experiential present. The discourse invites the reader to experience Spiegelman’s diegetic layer as the present and pits it in direct opposition to Vladek’s reconstruction of his own past through memory as he recounts it. When Vladek’s past is first introduced, the discursive pattern abruptly changes from the traditional square moment by moment panel organization to a circular frame. The sudden discordant panel is an intentional visual separation between the immediate experiential reality and the reconstructed intradiegetic narrative of Vladek’s memory. While the last panel of the passage is the first instance of a visual metaphor used to bring attention to the representational differences between direct experiential present and fallible memory, it is by no means the last. Spiegelman continues to use nontraditional paneling such as nontraditional shapes and spacing throughout Vladek’s remembered narrative to represent the inherent reconstruction of memory that separates the past from the predictable causality of the panels that represent the present. By breaking from the grid panel construction, Spiegelman directs awareness to the reality that memory is not experienced linearly, but associatively, as the recalling of each memory causes it to become corrupted and reconstructed by the events in Vladek’s entire personal narrative and present. Only a page later, Spiegelman reinforces
the introduction of the simultaneous separation and residual overlap between the past and present in the following passage:

Though Vladek’s memories are depicted via a conventional panel spread in the passage above, Spiegelman still reinforces the constant presence of the diegetic present in the reconstruction of Vladek’s memory through the imposition of Vladek’s direct narration over the illustration of the diegetic past. The intermingling of the two different times represents the obligatory influence of the present upon how the autobiographical self is interpreted and constructed within an individual’s memory. The intentional juxtaposition of temporally separate diegetic narratives intended to acknowledge the problematic nature of memory is perhaps most strongly depicted in the bottom left panel. In the frame, Vladek’s present and past are represented together within the same panel—the objectively correspondent representation of Vladek on the stationary bike depicted against a background of Vladek’s autobiographical self of his memory. The obvious hyperbole used by Vladek in his comparison of himself to Rudolph Valentino serves to highlight the individual’s subjective reconstruction of his or her historical identity.

Vladek’s present juxtaposed against his perceived past creates a visual metaphor that emphasizes how the past invariably must be resurrected in terms of the present—complete with all the subjective reinterpretation and problems inherent to memory itself.

After establishing a discursive panel organization and construction that highlights its own awareness of the problematic nature of memory in comparison with objective historical events, *Maus* continues to explore the simultaneous separation and inevitable connection of the past and the present for the rest of the narrative. As the novel progresses, *Maus* continues to experiment with unconventional discursive layout to create
metadiscursive visual metaphors designed to explore the relationship between the
diegetic past and present in narrative construction.

Examine the passage below:

The passage begins with a traditional panel layout with moment-by-moment transitions between each juxtaposed panel granting the sequence an immediacy characteristic of Spiegelman’s depiction of the diegetic present. However, as Vladek recounts his past, the photos representative of memories begin to encroach upon the present as they are depicted intersecting and interrupting both each other and the present panels. Thus, through the discourse of the work, *Maus* creates a visual metaphor communicating not only Vladek’s present as smothered by memory rendering him incapable of escaping his past, but also how memory does not exist in isolation—instead is always recalled in the context of the present. Vladek recalls the memories of the photographed individuals, but cannot remember them without full knowledge of their death in the holocaust. Consequently, Vladek’s narrative is influenced by his full knowledge of all events pertaining to his constructed autobiographical self. Through the depiction of the photographs directly intersecting the present panels, the discursive construction of the narrative highlights the necessary relationship between the past and the present in the reconstruction of memory.

While *Maus* employs a more overt metadiscursive method in recognizing the representational problems for a nonfictional work dependent upon the correspondently unreliable processes of memory, *Persepolis* alternatively uses a subtler approach. Rather than relying on interjection or nontraditional panel layout, *Persepolis* critiques memory as a source of objective correlative truth through the juxtaposition of broader historical events and the narrator’s autobiographical experience.
Consider the following passage:

By directly juxtaposing a panel describing the suicide bombers against one depicting the narrator’s first party, the discourse of *Persepolis* reveals the obvious contrived reconstruction of its narrative events. In objective reality, the narrator’s party most definitely has had little or nothing to do with the suicide bombers; however, by presenting them in comparison and direct contention, the narrator extrapolates more meaning from her life’s event. In using such an intentional juxtaposition, the discourse reveals an obvious redefinition of a subjective personal past event in the terms of a historical event. For the narrator, the memory of the party is now inseparable from the broader events of objective reality and due to hindsight, the narrator is now able to make the connection between the violence inflicted upon other children and her own contemporary childhood experience. While a powerful literary and visual juxtaposition, the jarring transition between the first and second panel is not representative of a correlatively truthful depiction of the narrator’s autobiographical experience, but is a deliberate self-reflective acknowledgement of the reconstructedness of memory facilitated through the discursive structure of the work itself.

Memory in the construction of the past is an act of forgetting and selection in order to formulate connections and create a narrative—a problem that *Maus* and *Persepolis* acknowledge through discursive construction. As graphic novels, the visual organization of the panels themselves is key to the narrative, but also to the metafictional elements contained therein. Besides bringing attention to the reconstructive or contrived nature of memory, the discourse organization further explores memory as a problematic narrative device by highlighting its associative and selective reality as different from the
often linear narrative elsewhere imposed. *Maus* is notable for Spiegelman’s near constant discursive manipulation to represent his father’s memory as highly tangential. The panel organization of *Maus*, specifically the organization of sections depicting Vladek’s past, often obliges the reader to understand the narrative of the work in an associative and connective fashion rather than strictly linearly. As American psychologist William James states, “In the practical use of our intellect, forgetting is as important a function as recollecting… Selection is the very keel on which our mental ship is built” (39). On page 44 through page 47 of *Maus I*, Vladek drifts between his memory of his experience as a Polish soldier in 1939 and an anecdote of Vladek’s initial exemption from the army when he was twenty. The organization of the selection panels retain a fluid transition between the first narrative and the second—clearly reinforcing the fact that Vladek’s memory is associative and the tangent sprang from the connective associations made between one memory and another. The act of writing a work is an act of selection, much like memory itself but more intentional; consequently, the inclusion of such a tangent is an intentional attempt at representing and acknowledging the nonlinear associations experienced as memory is recalled and reconstructed. An individual’s autobiographical memory does not exist in a causal narrative structure, thus each memory may trigger semantic, emotional, or other connections to separate, but related experiences. Without linear structure, the memory-dependent causal narrative may begin to break down, however, *Maus* acknowledges the problems of memory-based representation without dissolving the story itself.
Through the manipulation of the discursive presentation in panel shape and placement, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* realize a metadiscursive recognition of the problematic nature of memory without sacrificing narrative linear causality and the resulting dissolution of any correlative truth. Due to the often extreme subjectivity and associative nonlinearity of memory reconstruction, too much inclusion of self-aware acknowledgement may have easily led *Maus* and *Persepolis* to lose all of their perceived nonfictionality; however, by using discursive elements rather than story to articulate memory problems, both works achieve the subtlety necessary to weave metanarrative reflection with objectively true correlative representation.
Part Five: Subjective Reconstruction and Narration

Discourse is again used in both works to reflect upon the subjective construction of nonfictional representation in both *Maus* and *Persepolis*’s distinction between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narration. According to historian Hayden White, the distinction between a subjective interpretation of events in the formulation of a causal historical narrative and what is presented as an objective record of historical events is related to the difference between narrating and narrativizing the historical events.

Narrating, according to White, is formulated from a single subjective source, while narrativizing is objective and is when the events appear to “tell themselves” devoid of an individual narrative voice (4-10). In the case of both *Maus* and *Persepolis*, the narratives are dependent on the explicit presence of singular sources of subjective memory and are thus narrating the historical events thus accounting for the construction of the stories (and histories) they tell.

More so than solely textual works, graphic novels allow for a very deliberate juxtaposition of intradiegetic and extradiegetic narration as well as the transitions between different diegetic levels through the use of the caption box. The caption box is usually a small panel that overlays the action represented in the panel in which it contains—similar to a voiceover. By using the caption box, the discourse establishes a clear separation between the intradiegetic storyworld of memory as different from the extradiegetic narration of the individual remembering and reconstructing the narrative itself. Therefore, the caption box emphasizes the distinction between a subjective account based on the selective memory of an individual and an objective historical
account of past events. In the case of *Persepolis*, the interjecting caption box is almost exclusively used as the extradiegetic narrator makes comments upon or clarifies the action occurring in the intradiegetic storyworld being represented. As an autobiographical work, the past tense extradiegetic narration of intradiegetic remembered events is a familiar construct of nonfictional autobiographical work; however, the visual superimposition of the caption box onto the panel depicting the intradiegetic events in the graphic novel medium of *Persepolis* reinforces the reconstruction of memory and its subsequent dependence upon the present. The intradiegetic events are necessarily understood through the context provided by the caption box—consequently, the visual separation reinforces the dependency of memory upon the subjective reinterpretation of past events by the extradiegetic narrator. The reader is continually reminded that the represented intradiegetic story has been reconstructed, selected, and represented by an extradiegetic narrator and is thus not a representation in direct correlation with personal and objective historical events but is instead an inherently subjective account. The intradiegetic past does not exist without the imposition of extradiegetic influence—particularly in *Persepolis* as nearly every panel depicting the past is coupled with a caption box providing commentary from the extradiegetic present.

While *Persepolis* uses caption boxes within panels as a method of maintaining separation between two distinct diegetic realms, *Maus* uses similar discursive techniques to maintain three diegetic levels—Vladek’s memory, Spiegelman interviewing Vladek, and Spiegelman’s metafictional representation of his own struggle to write *Maus* itself. In order to represent three different diegetic levels within one work, Spiegelman must
employ several discursive devices to create distinction as well as establish metafictional self-awareness of the subjectivity in the construction and representation of the narrative itself. When *Maus* introduces the separation between Vladek’s memory and interviewing Vladek, Spiegelman employs both caption boxes and intradiegetic panel transition.

The following passage exemplifies the above:

![Image](https://example.com/image)

**Fig. 12.** Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: and Here my Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991) 58. Print.

This passage depicts a dramatic juxtaposition between the past and the present as an aged, well-dressed Vladek transitions abruptly into the young, emaciated Vladek in Auschwitz. When the diegetic transfer occurs, the panel representing Vladek’s past is immediately reflective of the last panel depicting the other intradiegetic storyworld—the action in Vladek’s and Spiegelman’s diegesis is completed in Vladek’s past as Vladek faces left to create an immediate parallel between the diegetic past and present. The visual separation between two temporal levels and two physical manifestations of the same character (young versus old) clarifies the distinction between the past and present,
yet Vladek’s continued telling of the story links the two diegeses through the process of narration. Rather than clearly marking off the past from the present, Vladek’s continued narration in the caption box highlights the representational problems in which the past is revealed as constitutive of the present and the present makes demands on the ways in which the past is represented (Mcglothlin 3). Thus the direct correlative transition between two intradiegetic storyworlds combined with the use of the caption box serve to reinforce the subjectivity of Vladek’s intradiegetic narration—in fact, the events of the past cannot be extrapolated from Vladek’s subjective selection, reconstruction, and imposition of a causal narrative focalized through his own perceived agency in the events Vladek recounts.

*Maus* further acknowledges itself as a reconstructed work of subjective memory through the introduction of a third extradiegetic storyworld in which Spiegelman depicts himself in the process of writing *Maus* itself. Spiegelman uses such a metafictional representation as a means to communicate his own subjective voice in the reconstruction of the novel, both with regards to the autobiographical aspects of the work as well as Vladek’s biographical narrative.

Consider the following passage:
Through such a direct acknowledgement of the extradiegetic level, *Maus* examines the role of author as selector and subjective interpreter of the narrative. In this discursive level, Spiegelman confronts his own reservations about the involved subjectivity his own involvement in the representation of both his autobiographical story as well as his father’s biographical story. One oft revisited representational problem addressed in the extradiegetic narrative level is Spiegelman’s discomfort in his depiction of both himself and his father within the story and the necessary distillation of character to fit representative demands. Such a concern is expressed in Spiegelman’s fear that he is representing his father in a highly stereotypical fashion and again seen in his repeated examination of the use of the literalized metaphor of animal imagery. Through the metaphor, Spiegelman is able to express very difficult and nuanced ideas. Spiegelman says, “Paradoxically, while the mice allowed for a distancing from the horrors described, they simultaneously allowed me and others to get further inside the material in a way that would have been difficult with more realistic representation, where one could constantly question my choices” (149). Spiegelman relies upon culturally understood and accepted master plots to generate meaning; however, he also necessarily distills down the individual identities of both himself and his father in order to facilitate the more literary meaning derived from the visual metaphor he creates. Such a representation of identity both culturally and individually is problematic, just as any individual’s representation must be distilled and selected by any author to suit the context of the narrative.

Spiegelman further uses the discursive introduction of an extradiegetic storyworld to explore his role as subjective selector and narrator for both the construction of his autobiographical story and Vladek’s biographical story. Wearing the mouse mask,
Spiegelman points to the text’s self-conscious reflection on its own production and on the representational choices Spiegelman made from a spectrum of aesthetic possibilities. In the very nature of creating a representation of his father’s story, Spiegelman had to imagine the story and consequently was forced to recreate, select, and change the story itself. Spiegelman chose to cast his father’s narrative in a universe of anthropomorphized animal characters, but by wearing a mask in the most external diegetic level, he exposes his choice as a literary frame designed to generate greater metaphorical meaning, but is ultimately an arbitrary choice. Spiegelman’s mask ejects the reader from their acceptance of the animal metaphor and highlights both its effectiveness as a discursive device and its artifice as an author constructed metaphor. Furthermore, Spiegelman as author and selector in both his own and Vladek’s narration is made explicit in his depiction at the drawing table listening to tapes of his father and himself. However, by wearing the mask, Spiegelman acknowledges himself as author and the constructedness of the text itself without completely breaking the metaphor and diegesis because he remains a depicted character within the confines of the discursive rules (he is still portrayed as a mouse, not a human). By acknowledging the metaphor but not breaking it, Spiegelman uses the extradiegetic narrative level to bring attention to the process of writing itself as well as the problems inherent in selecting, constructing, and representing a nonfictional story.

While perhaps paradoxical in nature, the acknowledgement of representational problems and challenges to correlative truth actually increase reader perceived nonfictionality. By acknowledging the inherent problems of memory and subjective narration in the construction of nonfictional works, in particular memoir, Maus and Persepolis recognize the impossibility of achieving absolute correlative truth and thus
generate a self-aware truthfulness that augments, rather than detracts from, each work’s perceived nonfictionality. In the inclusion of metafictional self-reflection in combination with discursive elements that increase perceived correlative truth, both *Maus* and *Persepolis* transcend the binary of either absolute correlative truth or utterly subjective self-awareness to obtain a greater degree of perceived nonfictionality through referential truth.
Conclusion

When most people think of comic books, the first thing that comes to mind might be superheroes and other low literary value adventure stories: Spiderman and Wonder Woman. Often, works that function within the comic book medium are not considered as equipped to communicate substantial narratives as works of other mediums such as literature, art, or film. However, my concern in writing this thesis has been to illuminate the complexity of comic book discourse and its communicative strengths, particularly with regard to the subgenre of graphic memoir. *Maus* and *Persepolis* are nuanced works of great literary depth and value not in spite of their comic discourse, but because of it. Both the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution are not subjects that lend themselves to flippant or trite portrayals, so the success in the telling of such stories through a comic book medium is evidence for the discursive format’s ability to convey a high degree of reader perceived nonfictionality.

Instead of detracting from the nonfictionality of either work, the comic discourse of *Maus* and *Persepolis* actually increases the degree of referential truth by including elements of correspondent truth as well as metafictional self-awareness of their own representational states. As I’ve discussed, cognitive elements of Theory of Mind, facial recognition, and cognitive perceptual closure in combination with the stylized comic iconography of the illustration and the discursive organization of the panels themselves creates correspondently true representational storyworlds. The reader becomes witness to the diegetic surroundings—experiencing through text and images the Sosnowiec Ghetto and the riots in Tehran’s streets. In such an immersion, the characters too cease to be so
distant as the audience identifies and empathizes with each internal world of psychological and emotional breadth.

Yet just as we are pulled into the diegetic storyworld, we are pushed out again—forced to examine the structure itself and reminded of the inevitable separation between reality and representation. Neither *Persepolis* nor *Maus* completely breaks their respective diegetic storyworlds, but both allow their seams to show—bringing attention to the impossibility of achieving absolute correspondent truth within a representative framework. By tempering the establishment of correspondent truth with metafictional self-reflection as evidenced by panel juxtaposition and different diegetic levels, *Maus* and *Persepolis* create correspondently true storyworlds without falling under the obvious untruth that the representation is indistinguishable from reality itself. Such a balance allows the reader to accept the represented correspondent truth without falling into the trap of hiding the inevitable rift between the work and the reality it represents. The result is the containment of a high degree of referential truth that creates an equally high level of nonfictional truth perceived in both *Maus* and *Persepolis*.

To contain referential truth is to also gain the reader’s trust and further commitment to the narrative the work contains. Through this connection, the story communicates greater literary truths in the nonfictional retelling as well as greater understanding and connection with the author and his or her process of recreating the narrative itself. *Maus* tells the story of Vladek’s survival and the relationship between the author and his father, but is also imbued with the weight of memory and guilt echoed between survivors, father and son. *Persepolis* is at once a bildungsroman and a meditation on the nature of freedom, tradition, and youth when met with oppression and
war. As such, both *Persepolis* and *Maus* break preconceived expectations of comic book discourse to lend the reader an intimate look into the lives of the characters as well as imbue stories with cartoon drawings of girls and mice with enough nonfictional truth as to give them breath and life.
Works Cited and Consulted


