

Capturing the Real, Raw Experience of Trauma

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 172). This refrain, while often attributed to Winston Churchill, comes to us from philosopher George Santayana, and remains true and important today. However, the imperative goal that we must remember the past beyond the first generation is an elusive target, and easier said than done. However, in order to not repeat history’s events we do not wish repeated – the traumatic and horrific events – we must document these memories. While individuals who experience these events will certainly not forget in their lifetimes, how do we properly convey the past in a way that will commit it to memory for future generations? In this essay, I examine the importance of first-person narratives in documenting trauma. Their importance derives from the unique emotional impact of their authenticity and rawness.

First, let us address what it means to document trauma. Victoria Elmwood defines that “trauma is characterized by the subject’s inability to assimilate fully an event; the event is not completely experienced by the subject as it happens. After a latency period, the mind returns neurotically to the event itself, structuring the consciousness around the fact that the mind is ever preparing itself to re-survive the traumatic experience all over again... History is built around a similar struggle with gaps” (Elmwood, 705). This unique link between how history is documented and how the human mind handles trauma is important, as it means there is an authenticity to the natural actions of memory of those who experienced the trauma, or bore

witness to it. Claudia Welz defines a witness as “an observer or source possessing privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to facts” (Welz, 709). This “privileged” experience is what is unique to trauma and how we document it, and what must be captured. Hirsch and Spitzer, in their studies of memory, also address the importance of bearing witness “from the inside” (Hirsch, 157), even though their focus is on the difficulty of doing so. This first-person experience, in the fact that it is raw and authentic, and is essentially human, is what makes it so important to documenting traumas experienced by humanity; This is the only way we can hope to relay the lived experience of trauma to future generations.

There is an emotional impact of first-person narratives that is unique solely to them, that brings the reader in touch with our own humanity. For instance, one can compare reading history textbooks about the Holocaust, where we are given factually accurate information, but without a human element, to the power of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. There, they not only give the historical information, but you travel through the timeline of the Holocaust with a “passport” of a true Holocaust victim (some survivors, some not) and you live the experience of the museum through this real person’s eyes. I’ve attended the museum myself over a dozen times, and always leave impacted by the new person’s story I was exposed to. Actual video footage, real artifacts from the Holocaust, standing in the cattle cars used to take people to Auschwitz... all of this real, raw, first-hand documentation is what has the profound impact. (United States) Conversely, this impact is lost in the fictional realm. This is not to say there is no emotion within fiction, but rather that the impact gets diluted. For example, the film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* portrays a storyline loosely-based on the Holocaust, and has good intentions. The director of the film credits that he wants the film to “to move people, not just shock them” (Ramos), but this statement in and of itself implies the dismissive nature of

fiction that I'm referring to. The actual trauma of the Holocaust is perceived as so horrific, that fictional writers try to either water it down or sensationalize it. This does more harm than good, as Hannah Randall points out that the film "perpetuates[s] dangerous myths about the Holocaust" via "historical inaccuracies and stereotypical portrayals" (Randall). This attempt to change the story of history to make it more palatable, which carries a consequence of defiling the history itself and risks us repeating it. To document trauma in such a way that meaningfully commits it to the memory of humanity as a whole, we must maintain the emotional impact of the reality.

First-person narratives bring out the humanity in us by still evoking an emotional response to the horrors, but with an authenticity that makes that impression last. For example, in *Maus*, Art Spiegelman relays the story of his father, Vladek's, lived experience of the Holocaust exactly as his father tells it, word-for-word for the most part – breaks and painful omissions and confessions included. In one scene, Vladek explains that if someone spilled soup, the rest of the prisoners would fight "like wild animals...until there was blood. You can't know what it is, to be hungry." (Spiegelman, 251) These types of scenes are spared from many fictional accounts, as they think it will somehow make an audience feel such descriptions of them as "animals" is in poor taste, but it carries an important image in that survival – true bare human survival – is violent. In an earlier scene, Art prompts Vladek that he'd read of a successful rebellion in which "they killed 3 SS men and blew up a crematorium" and Vladek responds "Yah. For this they all got killed. And the 4 young girls what sneaked over the ammunitions for this, they hanged them near to my workshop... they hanged a long, long time." (Spiegelman, 239) Again, fiction often tries to focus on what it thinks we want to see of the "heroes" who fought back, but the reality is that such stories are grossly unrealistic when the outcomes were so stark. Vladek's desire not to discuss such revolutions and omitting them from memory and his confession that the prisoners

could be like animals both have a rawness that reaches the reader on a new level. This emotional impact, this authenticity, is of utmost importance in documenting the trauma.

While Art, as the author, frames the story, and chooses to draw it as a graphic novel to relay the images as they play out in his head, the story remains authentic. Victoria Elmwood agrees that “*Maus*’s success as a hybridized narrative... depends largely on his ability to claim the Holocaust *without* claiming to have experienced it” (Elmwood, 694). The first-person narrative gives us the story without appropriating it, as fiction often does. Elmwood analyzes a scene in *Maus II* where this can be seen (Elmwood, 699): Art had questioned his father about the orchestra playing at the gates of Auschwitz, but Vladek doesn’t remember the orchestra, only “guards shouting” and “marching” (Spiegelman, 214); Vladek didn’t see or hear the orchestra, despite history documenting they were there. Welz also explains this phenomenon, saying “seeing with the bodily eyes (perception) includes imaginative seeing with the mind’s eye (mindsight, conception), it is not merely passive” (Welz, 115). As we saw earlier with trauma, true experiences of trauma are accounted for differently: our mind only absorbs that which it determines crucial to survival. On the other hand, the history books and fictional movies that ensure the orchestra is included miss the human element of being a survivor, whereas Vladek’s experience rings more true to how we’d likely feel in that situation: when a person’s life hangs in the balance, an orchestra hardly seems worth noting, and is almost a luxury detail that could desensitize us to the raw horrors being experienced. As Sarah Horowitz explains, “the ‘moral witness’ [first-person account] keeps the human toll in the center of the frame... contains a call to ethics for the listener” (Greenspan, 205). Thus, the “rawness” makes it real, which helps us to understand trauma by challenging our comfort with the atrocities of history. Further, this gives voice to victims, thus uniquely resisting the “single story” (Adichie, 13:00), or any whitewashing

of history that may occur by the oppressors. Capturing these first-person voices is important, but isn't easy and requires use of unique approaches to use of mediums in order to relay the memory without co-opting it.

Maus I uses first-person to capture lived trauma, which is innumerable important, but critical reception of *Maus I* has questioned the effectiveness of the graphic novel medium to bear witness to trauma. Art Spiegelman depicts the characters – again, who represent humans who actually lived – as animals. Jews become mice and Nazis cats. Critics question if this is dehumanizing and causes the apathy I cautioned of in fictional accounts. However, I contend that regardless of his choice of medium, the trauma narrative is powerful because of its reliance on first-person narration. We can turn again to Hirsch and Spitzer to see that in memory studies as a whole, with the Holocaust being the focus of their work, stating “he [a Holocaust victim] can only remember that scene through the protective shields of projection and displacement” (Hirsch, 158). We see that this is merely a tool through which Art Spiegelman – a graphic novelist – can relay the story without compromising its integrity. The trauma relayed is not his, directly, but he still suffers generational trauma. Consequently, he removes himself via this displacement, just as any other trauma victim may do. As Hirsch referred to, true trauma sufferers cannot face it head on. Recall where Elmwood earlier stated that trauma sufferers cannot fully “assimilate” the trauma with reality. This displacement is that failure to assimilate in action, making it all the more raw and real. As Vladek says to Art in *Maus*, “You heard about the gas, but I’m telling not rumors, but only what I really saw, for this I was an eyewitness” (Spiegelman, 229) – there is a uniqueness to his eyewitness account that cannot be discredited. The medium, or genre, bears no effect on the authenticity of the trauma narrative.

The copious amounts of stories about the Holocaust act as testament of humanity's desire to commit it to memory and avoid repeating it, but I've shown how we must be careful to ensure that we focus on the emotional impact in order to appeal to the core of humanity, and that only real, authentic, first-person narratives have the power to do this without desensitizing us. If we allow ourselves to brush traumatic events aside as fictional stories, we shirk accountability for forgetting the past. Maggie Astor wrote in the New York Times in 2018 about a study that found the Holocaust is fading from memory (Astor) but even in that article visitors to Holocaust museums admitted there was a unique impact of first-person stories. Therefore, there is hope to remember history if we can capture first-person narratives, and avoid otherwise doomed repetition.

Bibliography

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The dangers of a single story." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, 24 November 2020, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.
- Astor, Maggie. "Holocaust Is Fading From Memory, Survey Finds." *New York Times* 12 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/us/holocaust-education.html>.
- The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Dir. Mark Herman. Miramax and BBC Films. 2008. Film.
- Elmwood, Victoria A. "'Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma Between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*." *Biography*, vol. 27 no. 4, 2004, Pp. 691-720.
- Greenspan, Henry, et al. "Engaging Survivors: Assessing 'Testimony' and 'Trauma' as Foundational Concepts." *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, vol. 28 no. 3, 2014, pp. 190-226.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Leo Spitzer. "The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies." *Memory Studies*, vol. 2 no. 2, pp. 151-170.
- Ramos, Steve. "'Boy in the Striped Pajamas' is a tough sell." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. 20 November 2008.
- Randall, Hannah May. "The Problem with 'the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas'." *The Holocaust Exhibition and Learning Centre*. 31 May 2019.
- Santayana, George. "The Life of Reason: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense." 1905. *IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis)*. <https://santayana.iupui.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Common-Sense-ebook.pdf>.
- Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997.
- United States Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C. <https://www.ushmm.org/>
- Welz, Claudia. "Trauma, memory, testimony: Phenomenological, psychological, and ethical perspectives." *Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today*, vol. 27, 2016, pp. 104-133.