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“Survivor’s Guilt” Chews Away our “Inner Child.” How *Maus I* and *Persepolis I* Showcase  
Guilt’s Hindrance to Healing Through Format and Figures

Human memory often becomes fragmented beneath the burdens of time and emotion when we look back on personal trauma, which oftentimes is a byproduct of our own guilt and confusion of surviving. As Doris Laub states in “An Event Without a Witness,” “The traumatic experience has been long submerged and has become distorted in its submersion... The horror is, indeed, compelling in not only its reality, but even more so, in its flagrant distortion of reality” (Laub 76). Laub’s idea of distortion is central to the format of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis I*, both of which depict major historical traumas—the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution—through the eyes of our protagonists. Although *Maus I* primarily is the protagonist, Artie, retelling his father’s experience enduring the Holocaust, he retells one memory of his mother’s, Anja’s, suicide through his own eyes; a loss that occurred when he was twenty. Unlike Artie, the protagonist of *Persepolis I*, Marji, recalls her firsthand experience growing up during the Iranian Revolution. However, as she shares how her family friend Ahmadi was tortured and killed, there are striking similarities in Artie’s and Marji’s creative approaches: both display how a young age manipulates one’s understanding of trauma. These graphic novels embody the disjointed nature of trauma, utilizing warped panel layouts and imaginative figures to mirror the fractured nature in which we process traumatic memories. We can frame our understanding of both layouts through Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*: “Comic 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). *Maus I* and *Perspolis I* portraits of the most personal and vulnerable moments within the text through distorted panel layouts and human figures possess a childlike composition, showcasing how one resorts back to a younger mindset when coping and processing “survivor’s guilt” from childhood.

Speigleman creates uneven and inconsistent panels throughout the three pages of Artie’s comic “Prison From a Hell Planet,” placing his inner turmoil of grief and survivor’s guilt on external display. *Maus I* uniquely takes the format of placing one of Artie’s own comics within the graphic novel itself to experiment with breaking traditional structure and to illustrate the effect Anja’s death had on Artie himself—an element of guilt we have yet to see Artie show. The title of “Prison From Hell Planet” alone signifies his mother’s suicide through the prison being metaphorical to Anja’s mind residing in a mental prison in hell, which she passes on to Artie once she dies. Nonetheless, we know from words alone that Artie’s tale is about to take a dark turn with his panel formatting and the characters themselves being no exception to the impending doom. We can use Scott McCloud’s analysis to frame our understanding of why Speigleman draws the comic differently. The staccato rhythm and the formalized structure becomes distorted with Artie’s comic panels to place the reader into a very imaginative yet uncomfortable setting and to showcase the intensity of his grief and guilt (McCloud 67).

Starting on page 101, the width of each respective panel varies, with the standout set being the four narrow panels framing a wide center panel with the prison guards screaming “She’s dead! A Suicide!” (Speigleman 101). The frames make not only the guard’s pop through the page but also draw our eyes to the progression of the singular tear becoming bigger and

bigger. Additionally, the various sizes distort viewers' perspectives and makes them as unable to process the surroundings as Artie was unable to process the news he had just found out. Page 102 switches formats from the previous page, now incorporating jagged, horizontal panels in the second line. Furthermore, the left panel seeps into the right as the casket partially covers Artie's face. Doing so allows Vladek's hanging from the casket and his screaming to consume the page, which is representative of Vladek's grief consuming Artie's own ability to function in the funeral setting. The distorted panels in "Prison From a Hell Planet" clue viewers in on why Artie faces so much "survivor's guilt" as an author—he never got the chance to grieve Anja's loss in the role of the child due to Vladek's inability to parent during this time. Artie was not only placed in an adult position sooner than his technical legality but also he felt the same level of guilt for being the one to survive over his mother—just like he felt with his own brother. The varying asymmetrical panels also allow Spiegelman to play around with the creation of these different funky figures and how they pop to viewers.

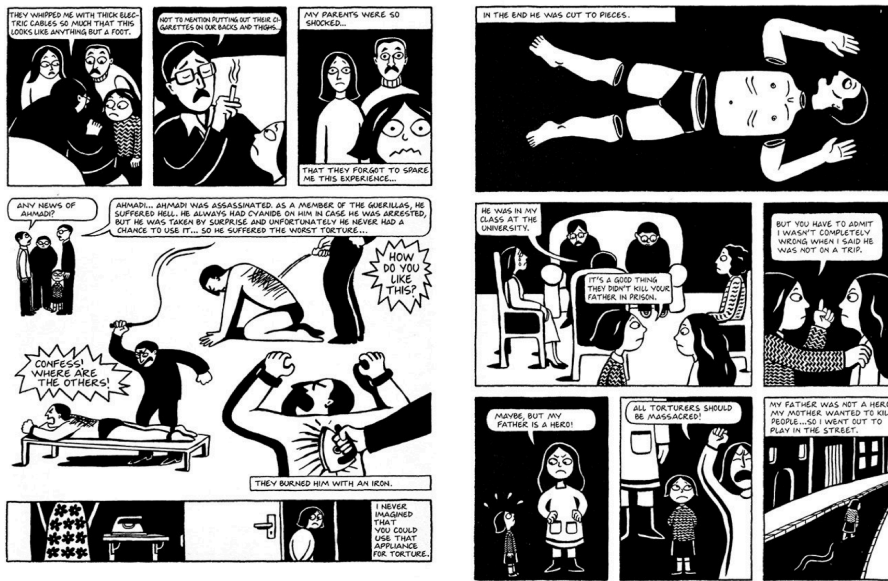
Speigleman creates unique and imaginative characters in "Prison From a Hell Planet" to represent how a child feels horror in the waking of Anja's death. Every figure has different face and body size, with some having heads that appear larger than their own bodies like the Doctor on page 101 (Speigleman 101). Additionally we have the skeleton-like, nearly faceless monstrous prison guards who pop out of the page to scream "She's dead! A Suicide!" at Artie (Speigleman 101). Even Vladek resembles Jim Carey in *The Mask* with his guitar-pick-shaped head and long jawline as he screams (Speigleman 101-102). Ironically, the only human-like figure is Artie, yet he depicts himself as a middle-aged man despite experiencing the moment young to highlight his maturity through enduring the chaos surrounding him. The clown and skeleton like figures both emulate the chaos and represent the figures who children fear the most.

As a result, Speigleman creates characters that could showcase how an adult tries to process surviving a traumatic event that destroyed any youth left within him. Although his mind may have been older, ultimately Artie is still the inner child begging to feel something as he writes “Prison From a Hell Planet,” demonstrating the mental regression that can occur when you are not equipped with the proper tools to process guilt and trauma.



In Chapter Seven of *Persepolis I*, Satrapi uniquely breaks from her symmetrical panels to depict the torture and eventual murder of Ahmadi, showcasing Marji's inability to understand the intensity of the torture methods and the subconscious "survivor's guilt" she feels for not being one of "the heroes." Even as adults, no writer or illustrator can prepare you to visualize being tortured—let alone an intense, three-step process to mutilation. As a result, these following graphics are arguably some of the hardest to witness within the whole text, especially considering that Marji's child-like depiction of the moment illustrates how an undeveloped brain processes major trauma.

On the middle of page 56, there is a huge panel-less, graphic of Ahmadi being whipped twice and attacked on the back with a heated iron. Similar to *Maus I*, we see the death of a character who is important to our protagonist straying away from the text's standard format. Although the subject-to-subject/moment-to-moment panels still exist through the remainder of the page, we follow the subject in a z-shape through his torture rather than left-to-right. We start at the top left, which shows the family asking about Ahmadi, then we look to the right and see Ahmadi's first hit, then our eyes move to the bottom left and we see the second whip (Satrapi 51). Finally, the iron strikes Ahmadi's back directly to the right (Satrapi 51). The z-shape interrupts the consistent, cohesive reading experience and has the imaginative feel of a child's illustration—with form being whittled down to the alphabet. We can connect the z-shape to McCloud's analysis because without solid gutters, we have to witness and connect these moments through the eyes of young Marji (McCloud 67). Additionally, the text bubbles follow the z-curve and are shaped like spiky-bubbles, which both contribute to the child-like demeanor and tie to the chapter's title: "The Heroes." These superhero-esque contributions show Marji's belief in Ahmadi's heroism; he dies for the cause of the revolution. Furthermore, young Marji consistently expresses her desire to be involved in the revolutionary movement throughout the story, yet she is unable to, leading her to idolize those doing so. However, the double-edged sword to idolizing these individuals is the perpetual guilt she still feels as an adult for being unable to participate. As a result, the graphic novel is Marji's own super-power as a child—even though she writes and publishes as an adult—which sometimes leaves us feeling unsettled by the innocent graphics we view.



The very last panel depicting Ahmadi's torture lies on page 52 with his mutilated body further illustrating the child-like understanding of disfigurement and death. Satrapi's choice to place the decapitation separately forces the reader to absorb the figure and the words themselves: "In the end he was cut to pieces" (Satrapi 52). Unlike the dramatic spikey bubbles, the words are simply placed in the upper-right corner of the panel, and their small size lets Ahmadi's body speak for itself (Satrapi 52). Additionally, finishing off with a long, horizontal panel on the next page creates the return to normalcy in structure, signifying a detachment from the torture we previously witnessed. However, as readers, we can not just move forward to the next panel in the story. We are left haunted by Marji's deeply unsettling visual of Ahmadi. The decapitation resembles a child's knowledge of anatomy: there is no blood (understandable considering the text is black and white), each cut appears round, and the way in which Ahmadi lies resembles the man in the game *Operation* (Satrapi 52). Furthermore, Marji's drawing of Ahmadi's open mouth does not look like a corpses' natural face, rather he appears to have died screaming in horror (Satrapi 52). The level of innocence in Marji's dramatized depiction leaves a pit in the reader's

stomach and shows the inability to process a death so graphic at an age so young. When we couple the lack of words, Ahmadi's fragmented figure, and now the black empty background, the haunting visual is oddly quiet in comparison to the previous page, highlighting the underlying sadness and guilt Marji feels in even having to remember and depict the given moment.

Both *Maus I* and *Persepolis I* utilize forms and figures to demonstrate how even as adults, the guilt you live with from trauma that occurs as a child remains in-tact and translates into artistic form. We as a society love to throw around the term "healing our inner child," but both Speigleman and Satrapi incline us to ponder whether or not the little one that still resides in each of our hearts can truly piece together the fragmented trauma that burdens our deepest subconscious. Feeling guilt over being the one to survive remains a nuanced topic that many feel ashamed to admit. Marji and Artie are two characters that showcase the innocence that still remains in us all regardless of the time that has passed. Furthermore, their art emulates the sad fact that their inner children never truly overcome their "survivor's guilt" and heal, but rather, they learn how to place their guilt into creating a product that might help their inner child survive another day. Although they may never be guilt free, they move forward through the distorted panels and continue to share the remainder of their stories.

Works Cited

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