Touching Pasts *In The Shadow of No Towers*: 9/11 and Art Spiegelman’s Comix of Memory

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Abstract: In this essay, I analyze the intersection of various national and collective traumas in *In The Shadow of No Towers*, as the author, Art Spiegelman, brings them together to serve his own political motivations. I suggest that Spiegelman not only utilizes the avant-garde medium of comix to recreate his experience of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, but he also points us to the impossibility of there ever being an avant-garde History. As he works through his own trauma of 9/11, Spiegelman remembers other catastrophic experiences (such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II) to highlight the cyclical nature of state violence. In the process, Spiegelman shows how personal traumatic memory can expose state narratives of historical progress as ideological productions. I argue that Spigelman’s work reveals an avant-garde consciousness in the sense that it utilizes comix to challenge the politics of the Bush-Cheney administration; however, I also point out that Spiegelman performs his own kind of violence by decontextualizing other collective experiences of traumas to fulfill his artistic-political aims.

Forgetting is essential to action of any kind [. . .] it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting”

Art Spiegelman’s comix, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, narrates the artist’s experience and survival of the September 11th (2001) terrorist attacks on lower Manhattan. In the work, published in 2004, Spiegelman directs a stinging diatribe at the politics of the Bush-Cheney administration, as well as that which he perceives to be its manipulation of 9/11 in the American cultural imagination. In the pages of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, he at once recounts his personal experience of 9/11 so as to arrive at a working understanding of an otherwise incommensurable national trauma, and stages a controversial political protest. The path to publishing *In the Shadow of No Towers* was far from effortless, and the trouble faced by the artist
in doing so suggests the subversive power of the comix at a historically vulnerable moment in the United States. In the foreword, Spiegelman confesses to having had difficulty in finding mainstream outlets to publish his work in progress (including The New Yorker, the New York Times, and the New York Review of Books). “In America,” he writes, “my reception was decidedly less enthusiastic,” whereas in “‘old Europe’ – France, Italy, the Netherlands, England – [his] political views hardly seemed extreme” (Spiegelman 2004: ii).

Unlike his earlier work, Maus, in which Spiegelman frames his exploration of the Holocaust through his father’s survival of the camps at Auschwitz, in In the Shadow of No Towers, the artist works through his own traumatic experience of 9/11 as a private citizen. He considers how his personal testimony is intimately bound up with 9/11’s representations in American politics and the mainstream media. As an audience, we wrestle with the following questions: 1) At which junctures do Spiegelman’s memories of 9/11 commence and dissolve? 2) Are political and cultural networks of institutionalized power always already present at these points, shaping and informing personal memory without our consent? Through his use of comix’s temporal and spatial cuts, Spiegelman recreates and complicates the problem of distinguishing between personal and collective memory.

If as Renato Poggioli argues, the avant-garde positions “the individualistic revolt of the ‘unique’ against society in the larger sense” through the promises of communal solidarity, then In the Shadow of No Towers narrates the virtualized “revolt” of one individual who sees himself profoundly connected to diverse societies which are subject to the self-interest of political operatives (1968: 31). Spiegelman reveals the way in which such rebellions are never fully outside or against dominant social groupings, since in order for “society in the larger sense” to perpetuate its power well into the future, it must rely on these same divisions between inside and outside, “us” and “them.” What is missing in this binary construction, however, is the extent to which those who are outside society—the marginalized, the abject, the inassimilables like Spiegelman—remain inside the rhetorical and ideological privileges claimed by “society in the larger sense.” In other words, Spiegelman’s own polemical protest against the Bush-Cheney administration necessarily exemplifies the power that he seeks to critique, thereby reifying the binary logic on which Western rational thought relies.