Holocaust etiquette, myth, and metanarrative: representations of Nazism in contemporary comics.

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Holocaust Etiquette, Myth, and Metanarrative:

Representations of Nazism in Contemporary Comics

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During WWII, Americans strove to make sense of the war and alleviate the anxieties of the tumultuous period through popular entertainment. A myriad of hero and superhero figures in film, radio, and comic books triumphed over Hitler and other Nazi leaders in a propagandistic effort to validate Allied efforts and American democratic values. Popular culture’s fascination with defeating monstrous Nazi villains persists today across a broad range of media, evident through the popularity of alternate history fictions such as the “Nazi Zombies” mode of the video game *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008) and the Red Skull antagonist in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). Comics, in particular, often return to the Third Reich and Nazi imagery to evoke a black and white model of morality, which reinforces a universal narrative that the American soldier is inherently “good,” while the Nazi enemy is vilified as absolute “evil.” Maturing from the juvenile, slapstick strips of earlier eras, contemporary comics often explore darker, more complex subject matter, such as Nazism, that attracts an adult audience. However, despite the opportunity to develop the Nazi character beyond flat representations of vicious killers and mad scientists, many comic writers and artists fall back on these easily digestible stereotypes, which “[have] acquired an uncanny entertainment value on a global scale. Almost any combination of swastikas, black uniforms, and German accents will ensure instant drama by providing an immediately accessible good-versus-bad set up with little need for further elaboration” (Kurlander 879). Audiences often accept formulaic Nazi archetypes in comics due to their preconceived notions of WWII, without questioning the implications of decontextualizing Nazism and the Holocaust. Separating the subjects from their historical reality perpetuates popular myths about Nazism that distort our perceptions of the past.

Perhaps in an attempt to recycle and rejuvenate often used tropes in the graphic representation of Nazism, contemporary comics commonly break what Terrence Des Pres terms
“Holocaust etiquette.” While Des Pres maintains that writing about the Holocaust should be historically accurate and serious in tone, comics and other forms of popular entertainment often exercise creative liberties to exclude direct representation of the Holocaust and reimagine the circumstances of WWII by incorporating a mix of generic elements to a humorous or absurd effect (216). In breaking these codes of etiquette, two typical modes of representation arise that can be explained through Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodern theory of grand and small narratives. In “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,” Lyotard posits, “We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives…But as we have seen, the little narrative remains in the quintessential form of imaginative invention” (499). While the majority of comic book Nazis conform to a kind of grand narrative, also called metanarrative, that perpetuates Nazi villains as a broad construct of evil and in conjunction with fantastic and supernatural myths, some exceptional titles emphasize the “little narratives” of individualized and personal histories of the war, whether biographical or fictional. The impact of these two types of narratives lies in the overall effect of the work on its readers. In other words, does the inclusion of Nazi figures or iconography constructively examine and interpret the social and political era of WWII in Germany, especially in its sensitivity to the Holocaust, or does it merely utilize the Nazi figure for its grotesque fascination and entertainment value? This paper will analyze how various contemporary comics represent Nazism by either adhering to or rejecting Holocaust etiquette, and in doing so contribute to or subvert metanarratives of WWII.

Within the last twenty years, commercial American publishers have released numerous comics that reference Nazi subjects and imagery. A majority of these comics indulge in fantastic worlds where Nazis enlist demons, vampires, werewolves, and Frankenstein’s monster to the Axis battlefront. Titles such as Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* (1993), Bill Willingham’s *Fables*, “War
Stories” (2005), Fabien Nury’s I Am Legion (2009), and Jonathan Hickman’s The Manhattan Projects (2012—) reflect fantastic, alternate universes in which German leaders harness supernatural forces to advance the militaristic and ideological aims of the Third Reich. These generically categorized “alternate history” narratives distort sanctioned history by incorporating a combination of tropes from speculative fiction into a unique arena where a new set of “what if” rules govern the sequence of historical events. Speculative fiction, a blanket term for the combined categories of science fiction, fantasy, and other genres, adds to the complexity of alternate history and its relation to the past by introducing impossible occurrences. These authors and artists present their comics as fiction, yet the texts’ focus on supernatural imagery mythifies and trivializes historical Nazism, and by implication threatens to dismiss the significance of WWII and the Holocaust.

Conversely, exceptional titles such as Art Spiegelman's Maus (1991) and Garth Ennis’ Enemy Ace: War in Heaven (2003) successfully develop the moral complexities of representing the Nazi regime by emphasizing individual perspective over metanarrative. By focusing on small narratives of individuals directly affected by the Holocaust, these comics disrupt any possibility of absolutist historicism that portrays Nazis as pure evil, and instead humanize both sides of the war. The recent increase in academic criticism on comics and graphic novels stems largely from the acclaim of Maus in which Spiegelman crafts a biographical and allegorical Holocaust narrative based on transcripted interviews with his father, Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish immigrant and concentration camp survivor. Even with the cartoonish, anthropomorphized portrayal of Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, Maus exemplifies the potential for comics to represent authentic historical narrative. Comparing this text to subsequent portrayals of Nazism and the Holocaust shows how contemporary titles borrow and depart from the most renowned
graphic retelling of the Holocaust. While *Maus* provides a personal history from the victim’s viewpoint, Ennis’ artistic reimagining of *Enemy Ace* evokes sympathy in the anti-hero Hans von Hammer, a German fighter pilot during WWI and WWII. Ennis’ attention to historical context in *Enemy Ace* highlights the cultural guilt associated with the Holocaust and calls into question the conflicting tropes of the “Good-German, Bad-Nazi” operating within von Hammer’s character. The style and structure of these titles exemplify the appropriate balance of Holocaust etiquette and blending of generic boundaries that allow the audience enough distance to constructively evaluate the moral dilemmas of WWII in the context of a small narrative, but not so much as to overshadow the event with a trivialized fascination of Nazi atrocities, as seen in mythicized approaches to representation.

**History in Comics: Holocaust Etiquette, Intertextuality, and Metanarratives**

Whether or not the comics discussed in this essay directly depict the events of the Holocaust, many critics argue that evoking Nazism and the context of WWII necessitates the inclusion of their atrocities (Abbenhuis and Buttsworth, Des Pres, and Kurlander). Approaching the Holocaust, even by proximal references to the broader context of Nazism, artists typically adhere to Terrence Des Pres’ terms of “Holocaust etiquette.” Des Pres identifies several tenets of decorum in his article “Holocaust Laughter?” that codify typical ways of writing about the Holocaust. While the first tenet speaks to the singularity of the Holocaust, the following points address artistic content:

2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.

3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead. (216)
These requirements not only set the standard for the ethical narrativization of personal histories of trauma during a unique period of history, but also provide a context for when the subversion of these rules are effective or transgressive. Des Pres also refers to these rules as a “set of fictions,” which acknowledges that any artistically recreated account constitutes a fictionalized narrative. Nonetheless, the second tenet of Holocaust etiquette assumes the existence of stable historical “facts” that can be used to compare inaccurate statements against accurate ones, despite the inherent narrativization of history itself. While art can never completely reconstruct reality, narratives about the Holocaust strive for historical accuracy within the limits of the chosen medium. The critically and scholarly acclaimed film Schindler’s List provides a somewhat rare example of the high level of historical accuracy possible in representing the Holocaust through an artistic medium that serves the dramatization of the sacred event.

While forms of “high art” such as literary fiction and non-fiction are perceived to adhere more rigidly to Des Pres’ rules of historical accuracy and solemnity, predominately visual art forms such as film and comics often depart from these rules due to the viewers’ more active participation in creating the narrative. Prose relies solely on the power of language to communicate the events of the story and interiority of the characters, which allows the readers’ imagination to construct whatever kind of visualization or interpretation the text evokes. On the other hand, film projects visual and aural information for the viewers to digest and use to reconstruct the narrative plot. The comic form, however, is unique in its mode of narrative representation in that readers simultaneously process juxtaposed images and text. In other words, the comic reader actively interprets both words and pictures to create meaning. In his seminal text Understanding Comics, artist and theorist Scott McCloud describes the production of meaning and narrative through a process he terms reading “closure.” Through closure, or the
imaginative leaps a reader must make over the “gutter,” the blank space between panels, the reader actively interprets visual and textual information to fill in the gaps between each frame. McCloud explains, “Every act committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader” (68). McCloud’s language of abetting crime through comics can be taken literally, the imagination can reenact violence or deviant behavior in a creative space, but it also implies that comics invite multiple interpretations through the conscious manipulation of multiple intertexts, or proximate pieces of information. Since reading comics consciously evokes our ingrained experiences and cultural associations, the reader is as responsible as the author for recreating the narrative. Figure 1 aptly illustrates the process of reading closure (McCloud 88). Although the two panels show only an open eye and a closed eye, the reader fills in the gap between the frames by imagining each step the eyelid takes to transition from open to closed. McCloud argues that the reader not only visualizes information between the panels, but also draws on a whole world of experience through all senses in the imagination (89). While this example is localized to a single action, the reader takes cues from the writer and artist throughout the comic in order to form a cohesive and immersive narrative. Therefore, when visual and textual information in a comic evokes historical events, readers also draw from culturally ingrained perceptions to reconstruct a narrative about history in a highly complex, cognitive process.
Comics can distort historical accuracy and solemnity not only by evoking culturally ingrained perceptions, but also by using elements of historical realism as one component in a single text that blends multiple genres. Contemporary comics often examine the relationship between various cultural products through intertextuality, or the blending of various intertexts and distinctions of high art and popular culture. Previously viewed as a low art form of commodified, mass-produced entertainment, comics increasingly employ intertextuality either by referencing canonical literature, fables and fairy tales, intellectual theories and philosophies, or conventions of visual art and film. Comics frequently break the third tenet of etiquette, approaching the Holocaust with solemnity, by adding a layer of humor to fictionalized historical narrative. In this case, humor is defined by the irreverent or nonserious tone elicited from nonrepresentational, cartoonish depictions. An example of the successful use of humor can be seen with Spiegelman’s animal allegory in *Maus*, which produces a nonserious effect but also effectively distances readers from directly confronting the realities of the Holocaust. A distanced perspective can better equip the audience to comprehend the magnitude of history and one’s relationship to it; however, this effect is not always produced. Contemporary comics that do not visually represent or reference the Holocaust can exploit Nazism by privileging other nonserious genres such as science fiction and fantasy. For example, the focus of Mignola’s *Hellboy* on the fantastic elements of sorcery and scientific experimentation distances the readers too far from the realities of WWII. When these kinds of comics avoid direct confrontation with the Holocaust, they threaten to obscure the reality and significance of the implied historical events.

The new historicity created by the reader through consuming intertextual art also relates to historiographic metafiction. The combination of various genres, forms, and cultural references inherent of intertextuality creates a new narrative that comments on the relationship between
history and fiction. Coining the term “historiographic metafiction,” theorist Linda Hutcheon asserts literary texts that reflect on the past are inherently self-reflexive and intertextual:

“historiographic metafiction, therefore, represents a challenging of the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history through its acknowledgment of their inescapable textuality” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 11). Breaking down the term into two parts, “historiography” refers to the writing of history, while “metafiction” draws attention to the construction and interconnectedness of writing, in this case most apparent through the *bricolage*, or combination, of various texts to form a historical narrative. While examples of historiographic metafiction are usually found in prose literature, Hutcheon clarifies sources and containers for intertexts can come from any medium: “It is not just literature and history, however, that form the discourses of postmodernism. Everything from comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspapers provide historiographic metafiction with culturally significant intertexts” (16). The “history” Hutcheon refers to in connection to various artistic and cultural discourses can also be defined as a narrative, which follows a strict set of generic limitations that adhere to a different set of standards and expectations than fiction. Although history is typically thought of as written prose, historical discourse can be contained in any form or medium, including comics. Intertexts relating to the past in comics can include either what is presented within the panels or implied between them. Therefore, Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction relates to McCloud’s comics theory of reading closure, since a reader’s interpretation of various intertexts creates new meaning that is enhanced in comics through the juxtaposition of images and text. By reworking the past of both the real world and fiction, comic readers create a new historicity in the imagination.
Defining history through a postmodern perspective of genre, however, recognizes the inherent narrativization of past events in the production of what is deemed authoritative history. From the late twentieth century onward, postmodern artistic and theoretical movements strive to deconstruct and destabilize convention by emphasizing the validity of multiple, simultaneous interpretations and perspectives found not only in “close-reading” the text itself in literature, but also history as well. In opposition to the previous dominance of scientific historiography that confines the study of the past to the scientific method, narrativist historians struggle to validate narrative as historical record, since it is unclear, “whether or to what degree the narrative [is] a reflection of reality or a construct” (Breisach 333). While many critics have defined history in terms of narrativism, Robert Eaglestone writes extensively on the Holocaust and Postmodernism, emphasizing that “History is not the recreation of the past as it actually was but, this transformation: ‘history’ is the name for a sophisticated and highly developed genre of the narrative told about the past” (234). Since history is most often written by the nation or system of greatest power, recognizing potential bias in historical information encourages critical interpretation over accepting any one fact as truth. Eaglestone, like Lyotard, warns against an over simplistic view of history that champions a single narrative, since it allows for pseudoscientific conspiracy theories such as Holocaust denial to gain some validity (227). Holocaust deniers, who believe the mass extermination of millions of Jews and other minorities did not happen, threaten to distort authentic Holocaust narratives in the same way over simplistic views of history encourage cultural memory to accept Nazism as an easily decipherable symbol of evil. This postmodern theoretical lens allows readers to criticize and interpret constructed historical narratives, whether Holocaust denial, survivor tale, or contemporary alternate fiction.
The postmodern distrust of totalizing narratives expressed by Eaglestone can be further explained using Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of metanarrative and his endorsement of localized small narratives. Metanarratives, or sometimes called grand narratives, attempt to present a comprehensive account of historical phenomena based on values of universal truths. Examples of metanarratives include the biblical narrative of humanity as inherently sinful after the fall of Adam and Eve, or the feminist narrative of patriarchal oppression throughout history. The metanarrative of WWII, therefore, attempts to account for the atrocities of genocide and unethical scientific experimentation of human subjects by asserting that Nazi leaders were exceptional forces of evil. Lyotard argues that instead of grand narratives that rely on consensus, or a universal acceptance of truth, narratives of historical events should be localized: “Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value…We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus…it must be local, in other words, agreed upon by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation…limited in space and time” (504). Lyotard’s advocacy of small narratives calls for attention to multiple perspectives and recognizes the inability to make overgeneralizations. Though the events of a small narrative may be true to the immediate characters, in a particular time and place, it does not impose the same truth upon other circumstances. Although Lyotard claims that acceptance of grand narratives is no longer viable, how is it, then, that so many comics accept and expound upon a grand narrative of Nazism with fascinating supernatural myths?

By examining comics and the various intertexts of history and other genres they employ, we can better understand how popular culture contributes to our understanding of history. As a unique and far-reaching part of the past, the representation of Nazism, especially in its relation to the Holocaust, provides the opportunity to investigate the implications of the two dominant
approaches—one that mythifies the historical accuracy of WWII and potentially trivializes the event, and another that pointedly and respectfully presents an individual perspective. While comics have a relatively limited audience compared to film and literature, the form itself lends well to the incorporation of textual and visual information that draws from various sources to create interpreted meaning. This essay will continue to examine the specific ways some comics contribute to grand narratives of Nazism, while others, such as *Maus* and *Enemy Ace* use methods of small narrative to contribute to the audience’s perception of the past through a localized perspective.

**The Mythization of Nazism in Comics from 1980s - Present**

When comics rely heavily on stereotypes and exaggerated signifiers of evil to construct Nazi characters they contribute to what Jakob Dittmar refers to as the “mythization” of history, which contributes to a grand narrative about the era. In “Comics and History: Myth-Making in Nazi References,” Dittmar argues that collective memory, or a culture’s understanding of the past, distorts the historical events of WWII through the mythization of Nazis, whose images and associated symbols become stock elements of character design. According to Dittmar, “Mythization transfigures and de-realizes historical conditions and interrelations in its adaption of occurrences, etc., to the demands of established ways of storytelling...When today’s comics use Nazi figures and attributes, they refer to some fictional construction that mythifies its historical origins” (278). Nazis found in contemporary comics that conform to generic conventions such as alternate history, science fiction, horror, and fantasy reconstruct the culture’s collective imagination, or understanding, of “real” history. Even when the audience consciously perceives mythified Nazis as fiction, aspects of the vilified character nonetheless seep into the reservoir of cultural associations and complicate historical perceptions. The
intertextual blending of historical and fictional icons makes it “difficult to keep the historical occurrences, conditions and interrelations accessible in collective and cultural memory without fictional distortion” (Dittmar 283). Since we encounter Nazi Germany primarily through cultural products, our collective memory and the subsequent popular understanding of past figures and events are inherently distorted and de-historicized.

Furthermore, audiences are increasingly removed from historical Nazism by both decontextualized Nazi imagery and the omission of references to the Holocaust. Maartje Abbenhuis and Sara Buttsworth suggest in their introduction to _Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Post-War Popular Culture_ that anachronistic and free-floating signifiers of Nazism remove the subject from its historical context and threaten to empty it of concrete meaning, potentially obscuring and trivializing the atrocities of the Third Reich.

Abbenhuis and Buttsworth clarify that:

> Nazism, at least how it is represented in many popular cultural forms, has been removed almost completely from its historical context. In general terms it references indiscriminate evil but in specific terms it fails to give any real shape or form to that evil. In this way, Nazism has become a free-floating signifier that could mean almost anything and, frighteningly therefore, nothing at all. (xxii)

Nazism as an exclusive symbol of evil in popular culture is often presented without specific reference to or direct representation of concentration camps or systematic fascism. These decontextualized portrayals of Nazis as villains or monsters distort the contemporary viewer’s perception of history. The danger of Nazism meaning “nothing” implicates a misunderstanding of the real events and figures of WWII. A prime example of decontextualized Nazi imagery in comics occurs in Frank Miller’s _Batman: The Dark Knight Returns_ (1986), which incorporates swastikas erotically emblazoned on the breasts and glutes of the Joker’s accomplice, Bruno, to associate the comic book villain with Nazi ideology. As seen in figure 2, the swastikas covering
Bruno’s chest, coupled with her masculine buzz cut and jawline, snake-like nostrils, and piercing glare, associate the villain with the transgressive and sexual domination of fascism. Miller positions Bruno in the corrupt underworld of Gotham City and uses Nazi symbols to inform her erotic character without delving into her origin. Bruno is an animalistic monster that will “strip your flesh with [her] teeth,” but her threat proves as empty as her connection to Nazism once beaten to a pulp by Batman (Miller 106). The association between forbidden sexuality and Nazi aesthetics such as its symbols, tight black leather, and implication of sadomasochism shock the audience, but its presence “also means inuring them, as Nazi material enters the vast repertory of popular iconography” (Sontag 12). As frequent portrayals of “sexy Nazis” desensitize the audience to hyper-sexualized fantasy, it also disregards the actual historical context of the conservative National Socialist party. The liberal use of Nazi symbols also exemplifies the modern shift in representation away from an attempt at historical realism: “what has become abundantly clear is that the care with which Nazism was approached in the immediate post-war years has been replaced with a degree of haphazardness and trivialization” (Hieronimus 90). Bruno’s appearance is outrageous and almost humorous, which completely dismisses the historical Nazis upon which the character is supposedly modeled. The more we see empty signifiers of Nazism, the more we are desensitized to its removal from historical context.
When comic book Nazis do find themselves within the appropriate setting of the Third Reich, they often do not reference or depict the Holocaust. The historical context is also significantly altered and trivialized by the incorporation of supernatural and fantastic imagery that appeals to the popular fascination with Nazi villains. No better character claims origins in mystical and occult Nazism than Mike Mignola’s title character *Hellboy*, a giant red demon summoned from the depths of Hell by the Russian sorcerer Rasputin to serve as a Nazi weapon of mass destruction. The composite genres of alternate history, horror, and science fiction that inform Mignola’s Nazi characters break both the second and third tenets of Holocaust etiquette by obscuring the historical accuracy of the events and neglecting to acknowledge or honor its victims. The first volume, *Seed of Destruction*, begins with the journal entry of a fictional American sergeant as he describes their investigation of the Nazi “Project Ragna Rok” alongside a team of paranormal scholars, a costumed hero, and a spirit medium to investigate the latter’s vision of impending doom. Figure 3 shows a group of Nazis gathered around Stonehenge as Rasputin summons the demon. Missing its target, Hellboy appears in a different location and is subsequently captured by the Allies (Mignola 4). Rasputin’s appearance and role in *Hellboy*’s origin introduces the element of alternate fiction into the series by imagining a world in which the mystic advisor of the Romanovs is immortal, powerful, and aligned with the Nazis to bring about the apocalypse. Beyond the mere subject of mysticism and
conspiracy, the “otherness” of Rasputin and the Nazis are enhanced by Mignola’s distinct artistic style and recognizable color palate. Using heavy black shading and solid colors, Mignola draws attention to the eerie blue eyes of the Nazi soldiers, which contrasts with the bright red encircling the swastika on Rasputin’s chest and on the eye of Klaus Werner von Krupt, Hitler’s liaison for the project. Symbols also play a significant role in creating meaning in both panels. Not only is the swastika prominent, but also a satanic pentagram and the invented insignia for the project, a crowned dragon. These images juxtapose Nazism and apocalyptic imagery, which exaggerates the historical occult roots of National Socialism, as many of the early party leaders were involved in the occult Thule Society that subsequently influenced Nazi ideology (Kurlander). Tension is also created between the fantastic elements of the ancient occult symbolism on Rasputin’s cloak and the science fiction technology of his gloves and the surrounding yellow conduits. Visual elements in the panel illustrate the blending of generic boundaries in Mignola’s series as a whole, which can be simultaneously categorized as horror, fantasy, science fiction, action/adventure, and alternate history. However, the inclusion of these generic conventions trivializes the historical events of WWII, as the Holocaust is neither referenced nor depicted throughout the series.

While Hellboy’s origins focus on mysticism, the series increasingly centers on an easily accepted good-versus-bad model of morality and the generic trope of Nazi as “mad scientist.” This kind of conventional representation contributes to grand narratives of WWII instead of questioning on how the events affect Hellboy’s individual history. Throughout the beginning of the series, Hellboy and the other members of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense uncover failed and resurrected Nazi experiments with supernatural creatures and futuristic weapons technology, such as an abandoned army of homunculi, or alchemical humanoids, and a
resurrected space program intended to lure an alien harbinger of the apocalypse. In *The Conqueror Worm*, Herman von Klempt, a conspirator from Project Ragna Rok, returns as a cryogenically preserved head housed in the body of a homunculus with a swastika carved into his forehead. Although equally monstrous and otherworldly in appearance, Hellboy, Abe Sapien, and the Lobster Claw are humanized and valorized for their hatred and defeat of the last active Nazis. Hellboy and his companions encounter a mysterious figure on their journey to Hunte Castle in Austria, the long deserted fortress of the Nazis’ secret laboratories. Once the figure reveals his SS uniform, Hellboy immediately attacks, as seen in figure 4 (1.19). The prominent word bubble effectively captures Hellboy’s outrage at discovering the figure’s identity, and the “WOX” action phrase and descending lines and rumble emphasize the force of his blow. He later apologizes for his vehement reaction: “Sorry about that. I have a particular problem with Nazis” (1.20). Although Hellboy was destined to become a conduit of Nazi power, he defines his identity according to his freewill and moral antithesis to Nazism as an American and agent of the U.S. government. Although he is physically more demonic than the Nazi villains he opposes, Hellboy contributes to the grand narrative that Americans, even monstrous ones, are the moral heroes and Nazis are the “mad scientists,” two-dimensional characters that stand in for evil. Mignola admits to exploiting Nazis for their accessibility and popular fascination in an interview with Westfield Comics “[Nazis are] so easy to use as villains because they don’t require any explanation. There are so many theories about what the Nazis were up to, you can
pretty much say, ‘yes, the Nazis had a space program’ and people go ‘well that could have been true. God knows they were working on everything else.’” While Mignola also admitted he would not include Nazi villains in any subsequent story arcs after *Conqueror Worm*, the previous narratives contribute to the universalization of inherently good Americans and inherently bad Nazis. He fails to truly deconstruct the similarities and differences between Hellboy and his Nazi antitheses on a localized level, even if he retained the supernatural and alternate history elements of the plot that make the series so appealing.

While *Hellboy* was one of the first commercially successful serializations in the early nineties to revitalize the subject of Nazism and WWII using the weird alternate history subgenre, many other comic creators followed suit to a similar, trivializing effect. Bill Willingham’s *Fables*, which has won multiple Eisner Awards, perhaps the most prestigious award in the comic industry, reimages the fate of familiar fairy tale figures such as Snow White, the Big Bad Wolf, Beauty and the Beast, and many others. While the majority of the series focuses on the establishment and preservation of Fabletown, a community of refugee fables hidden from the “mundy” world in New York City, Willingham takes advantage of the immortality and relocation of his characters to create “War Stories,” a two-issue arc that follows Bigby Wolf as a mercenary American soldier in WWII on a secret mission behind enemy lines. Reformed from his ways as the villain of “Little Red Riding Hood” and other tales, Bigby remains hardened but ethical as Fabletown’s sheriff. Strikingly similar to Mignola’s setting in *The Conqueror Worm*, Bigby and the “Dog Company,” a special ops troop of American soldiers, infiltrate the historic “Frankenstein Castle” where a group of Nazi scientists are attempting to unlock the secrets of reanimation from Mary Shelly’s creature. The revealed scene, pictured in figure 5, illustrates familiar elements of alternate history and “mad scientist” tropes (Willingham 28.22). Nazi flags
and armbands are prominently displayed and emphasized with bright red coloring. The tight, black leather uniform of the SS commander is domineering, and contrasts the over-sexualized “femme fatale” appeal of the female doctor.

The small, framed portrait of Hitler underneath the flag is the most comedic, as it is depicted in a mockingly cartoonish style. During an interview with Willingham, Mark Syp asks about the inspiration behind incorporating the Frankenstein character into a WWII narrative:

MS: It also dovetails with urban legends about Nazi scientists and their experimentation. And, of course, some of that unfortunately wasn’t urban legend. You look at an urban legend like The Boys From Brazil and say, “maybe they weren’t cloning Hitler, maybe they were resurrecting Frankenstein.”

BW: Yeah, it’s an extrapolation of the some of the stuff they were really trying. It’s a weird crazy world out there, so let’s have some fun and poke some holes in it.

Willingham nods to historical Nazi figures like Josef Mengele, known for unethical and dehumanizing experiments on prisoners during WWII, and the grand architecture of Heinrich Himmler’s castle in Wewelsburg through the setting of their experiments; however, by replacing the context of the Holocaust and its victims with characters such as Frankenstein and his confrontation with Bigby, the American werewolf, the narrative elicits a nonserious tone that disregards Holocaust etiquette.

Furthermore, “War Stories” perpetuates grand narratives of hyper-masculinized American heroism through the presentation of Bigby’s character and his opposition to
Frankenstein and Nazism. In his article “Negotiating Wartime Masculinity in Bill Willingham’s *Fables,*” Mark Hill aptly notes how closely “War Stories” resembles traditional American war narratives and the stages of Joseph Campbell’s “mythic hero.” These metanarratives can be seen through Bigby’s personal history of redemption and second chances, which has reached its peak as he uses his supernatural strength for the good of the Allied cause. However, once revealed it seems transparent how the various intertexts of American myths about war inform the narrative: “Like many glamorized stories of Americans at war, this war narrative is fueled with ideology-driven marketing…that create[s] an ideology of soldiers as heroic champions serving their country” (Hill 184). Similar to the recruitment propaganda of the 1940s, Bigby champions the hyper-masculinization of the American solider. As seen in figure 6, even in his wolf form, Bigby’s muscular body is on display and dominates the grossly deformed Frankenstein monster, which serves as a stand-in for the otherness and transgression of Nazism as a whole. Bigby later goes on to emasculate Frankenstein entirely by ripping off his head, which he keeps as a trophy locked away in a cage in his Fabletown office. While the story ends by completing the framed narrative of the present-day Bigby showing reconciliation toward the talking-head monster, this particular historical flashback as a chapter within *Fables* does little to constructively evaluate the horrors of war, regardless of whether they are fictional or realistic. Instead, “War Stories” contributes to unrealistic and nonserious metanarratives that distort historical perceptions of WWII.
Fabien Nury and John Cassady’s *I Am Legion* follows a similar pattern of distortion using alternate history, mythic folklore, and scientific experimentation; however, this title can be distinguished by its darker tone and provoking, yet ultimately dishonoring, depiction of Holocaust victims. A French comic later released in English through an agreement with DC, *I Am Legion* follows two main intersecting plots of the “Legion” program—Nazi experimentation with a Romanian vampire, a young girl named Ana, who psychically controls an army of men through transferred blood—and the British investigation to uncover the undetectable Nazi spies in their midst. From the cover of the second issue alone, pictured in figure 7, the artistic representation throughout the series is more realistic, and the content is significantly darker than *Hellboy* or *Fables*. The center figure, Rudolph Heyzig, stares up ominously behind a partially obscured Nazi flag and the mysterious insignia of his Legion project, which also appears as a birthmark on the Allied bodies inhabited by Dracula. The dehumanized mass set at the very back layer of the chilling Nazi icons evokes the desolate faces of concentration camp prisoners. Earlier in the first issue, Doktor Zeiff approaches a guard at a train depot in Bucharest to obtain ten test subjects for the project. As seen in figure 8, occupants of each train car are packed suffocatingly close, and are no doubt deported Jews and other minorities such as Romanian gypsies in transit to
German concentration camps (1.17). The slim bar of the panel stretches the entire length of the page and provides a small, claustrophobic peephole into the true horrors of the prisoners’
conditions. The realistic, almost three-dimensional shading present in all of the figures in the
series becomes instantly horrifying as the disembodied hands of the victims grasp through the
chain-linked screen as a kind of visual synecdoche—dehumanized to the point that they are only
hands for the labor camps. This voyeuristic perspective positions the viewers as the surrounding
guards and the inquiring doctor, yet elicits pure revulsion at the blatant disregard for human life
and the stoic perpetrators responsible. Later in the testing center, one of the commanders
fabricates, or at least reiterates the lie told to him, that the subjects are “a group of soldiers we
cought red-handed, trafficking in the black market” (1.49). Under the control of Ana’s injected
blood, the starved and striped uniform-clad figures charge into a stream of simulated machine-gun
fire, compelled to fight until the very moment of their death. While Nury and Cassady
contextualize their Nazi villains and supernatural experimentation by acknowledging the victims
of the Holocaust, the fantastic plot of vampiric myth and the grotesque violence inflicted upon the
prisoners do not respectfully honor the solemnity of the Holocaust in the way Des Pres suggests is
appropriate. Instead, the fantastic elements of the plot obscure the historical event to the point that
Holocaust victims are exploited to fulfill the artistic justification of the alternate history structure.

Although I Am Legion attempts to approach the fascination with Nazi alternate fiction
and mixed-genre form with a more conscious and serious approach, the current and ongoing
series by Jonathan Hickman and Nick Pitarra, The Manhattan Projects, takes the absurdity of
alternate history comics to the completely opposite level. At the premise, Hickman stretches the
American military initiative tasked with developing the atomic bomb to include the development
of other conspiratorial advanced technology such as time travel, computerizing the mind of
Albert Einstein, and communicating with extraterrestrials. The historic ex-Nazi Wernher von Braun was indeed an aerospace engineer for NASA; however, Hickman equips him with a robotic arm and superhuman knowledge of rocket technology. Within this group of mad scientists, he assumes the Nazi mad-scientist role among a group of other super geniuses such as J. Robert Oppenheimer and Richard Feynman. Von Braun embodies the Nazi drive toward an efficient and technologically advanced utopia, as he expresses in figure 9, “See… the science is all that has ever mattered” (2.19). While science plays a major role in the development of the bizarre plot and nauseatingly abject style of *The Manhattan Projects*, the historical and intellectual allusions in Hickman’s project merely skim the surface of the critical potential alternate history possesses. Von Braun’s placement in such a hyper-fantastic, and ultimately comedic, world is merely a byproduct of the mixed genres.

![Figure 9](image)

The myriad of Nazi characters from *DKR* to *The Manhattan Projects*, and in many other unmentioned contemporary comics, solidify the art form and its consumers’ fascination with monstrous Nazi villains. These titles contribute to popular myths about the historical era of WWII through their inclusion in irreverent genres of speculative fiction, such as horror, science fiction, supernatural fantasy, fable, and alternate history. Distorting historical events threatens to
erase authentic narratives of WWII, as popular products seep into the collective memory of the past. In doing so, they also blatantly disregard the tenets of Holocaust etiquette, using the implied justification that if the comic avoids direct reference to the Holocaust it is exempt from treating the historical era and Nazism with accuracy and solemnity. Each exemplary title in some way breaks Holocaust etiquette by trivializing the event as something that does not need to be mentioned or appropriately factored into the construction of WWII narratives. Instead of using the distance of humor and irreverence to critique or evaluate the relationship between fiction and history, these comics contribute to the grand narrative pervasive throughout our collective memory in which Nazis are not represented on an individual level, and must conform to the standard elements of the fictional character.

**Confronting the Cat-Maus Allegory**

While various representations of Nazism in contemporary comics conform to the dominant mode of mythization and trivialization, outlying exceptions expose the constructive potential of breaking Holocaust etiquette and utilizing the perspective of small narratives. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* presents one of the most successful examples of comics as narrative history through its combination of forms. In “Literature Meets History,” Linda Hutcheon articulates how *Maus* exemplifies the strengths of intertextuality and historiographic metafiction: “fictionalized dialogues, memory, confession, therapeutic narrative, testimonial, obituary, biography, autobiography, history: all these different modes jostled together self-reflexively in the postmodern space” of the comic book. Although difficult to classify due to the various combinations of genres, when *Maus* hit *The New York Times* Best Seller list for fiction, Spiegelman petitioned to have it moved to the non-fiction list due to the meticulous historical and biographical elements of the piece (Hutcheon 8). The initial categorization of fiction could
have been due to the assumption that the comic medium does not accurately portray reality as well as prose non-fiction; nonetheless, the decision was no doubt influenced by Spiegelman’s frequent implementation of visual metaphor that distorts perceptions of realism. Figure 10 illustrates a densely allegorical scene in the second, more self-conscious, part of the novel in which Art discusses with his Jewish therapist about writing a comic on his father’s experience at Auschwitz and the different manifestations of survivor guilt in each of their lives (II, 44). The visible strings of their mouse masks draw attention to the artifice of constructed identity, emphasizing their shared Jewish heritage and Art’s second-generation survivor guilt. Art’s physical presence throughout the scene also dramatically shrinks in size, representing the childlike regression of his mental state as he confronts the stress of his success with the first volume of *Maus* and his father’s death. Both the mask and size distortion of the character illustrate the visual depths of metaphor Spiegelman achieves using allegory and iconography. Many critics have noted the success of Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic, allegorical style, portraying Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, etc. In doing so, Spiegelman consciously reappropriates anti-Semitic stereotypes, despite the seemingly inappropriate use of cartoons to represent the enormity of the Holocaust. When asked by comic critic Hillary Chute, during an interview for her work on *MetaMaus*, when he became aware of the history of the anti-Semitic representation of Jews, Spiegelman cites the 1940 German
propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, which portrays: “Jews as mice—or rather, rats—swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said ‘Jews are the rats’ or the ‘vermin of mankind.’ This made it very clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project” (Spiegelman 115). Such propaganda infused the culture of WWII-Germany and other occupied states, as the demonization of Jews provoked cultural tensions between the minority and other cultural groups. Vladek alludes to this tension as he recalls being denounced on the street by a group of Polish children: “The mothers always told so: ‘Be careful! A Jew will catch you to a bag and eat you!’...so they taught to their children” (I, 149). Instead of avoiding the negative caricature, Spiegelman achieves the opposite of dehumanization by infusing his narrative with the personal and authentic details of his father’s life. Des Pres notes that when humor is used effectively, as he argues is the case in *Maus*, “the value of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more active response” (232). In other words, visualizing Nazi brutality enacted through cartoon animals is more easily digestible than watching actual footage of concentration camp conditions. Therefore, the “humorous” approach of using an anthropomorphic metaphor distances readers from the initial aversion to the atrocity and allows them to consider sometimes overlooked aspects of the event, such as Vladek’s practical approach to survival. Like some metaphors, however, the allegory does not quite hold up with interpretive consistency, especially concerning the cat-mouse, predator-prey set up of the Jewish mice and German cats. As Arlene Wilner articulates, “The fact that Jews are humans, not rodents, is made emphatic by the portrayal of them with mouse heads, just as the truth that Nazis are *not* instinctively predatory animals but human agents responsible for crimes against humanity is made more persuasive by the comparison with cats” (108). Holding the human Nazis accountable for their actions through the ironic portrayal of natural predators, Spiegelman
likewise avoids dehumanizing the Nazis through the minimalistic style of his figures, which was the result of deliberate reexamination of the effects of representation.

Although the comic approach of allegory breaches Holocaust etiquette, the conscious style used to render the Nazi characters achieves a critical distance that complicates the traditional “Bad Nazi” stereotype. Figure 11 provides a side-by-side comparison of an early 1979 draft of the comic that uses a scratchboard technique and the 1991 published page. The initial technique is similar to Eastern European wood cut illustrations and individualizes each character with textured detail and heavy contrast. In an interview with Joey Cavalieri, Spiegelman explains his decision to rework the style of the narrative: “I found myself thoroughly dissatisfied with these wood-cut illustrations after a day or so. My problems with the drawing are, I would hope, obvious. First of all, it banalizes the information by giving too much information and giving too much wrong information...it tells you how to think, in a way that I would rather not push” (116). The close-up image of the guard in the top right corner of each page presents a sharp contrast between the early draft and the finished piece. Adopting a rounded, more abstract figure for the animals in the finished page, the tone of the images dramatically shifts away from blatant vilification of the Nazi guard toward a more nuanced and distanced approach. The eyes of Vladek and the guard diminish in detail, showing less exaggerated emotion, and the disproportionate size of the cat towering over the vulnerable mice in the first panel shrinks as well. The modified style lends to a more readerly approach to interpreting the Nazi guard by blurring the line of antagonist and victim throughout the
Figure 11. Top: Experimental Scratch Board, 1979. Bottom: Finished Page 1991 (II, 51)
allegory. By keeping the style and appearance of Nazi brutality to a minimum, Spiegelman subverts the grand narrative of inherently evil Nazis.

Ultimately, *Maus* presents a Holocaust-survivor narrative that focuses on Vladek’s personal experience. There are few appearances or references to political Nazi leaders; instead, the bulk of the representation of Nazi ideology is achieved through subtle iconography—in other words, the haunting specter of the swastika. Any pictorial image that carries meaning can be considered an icon; however, the swastika in particular bears enormous weight on victims of Nazism. Although it originated as a sacred symbol of Eastern religions, its association with the Nazi party has stigmatized the symbol to stand for Aryan supremacy and the subsequent “final solution” to purge Germany of racial impurity (i.e. the Holocaust). Visually portrayed as a looming shadow and reigning icon of Nazi ideology, Vladek recalls his first encounter with the swastika on a Nazi flag while riding a train through Czechoslovakia. As the passengers tell horror stories of Nazis taking over Jewish businesses, beating Jews and taking them away, an oppressively black Nazi flag consumes the background of each depicted panel (I, 32-33). Not only does the recurring background image represent the political Nazi occupation of Europe, but also the projection of psychological terrorism on the train passengers as they tell each story. Later, as Vladek and his wife, Anja, continue to hide from place to place to avoid deportation, the swastika appears once again as a symbol for their historically determined fate (I,
125). As shown in figure 12, the winding path leading them back to their hometown of Sosnowiec, shaped like the Nazi icon, can only lead to their eventual internment in Auschwitz. Using the abstract symbol for Nazism more than the physical presence of Nazi figures allows Vladek to communicate his experience of the war through a “small narrative” that privileges an individualized perspective from the victim’s point of view. This approach simultaneously adheres to a high level of localized historical accuracy and honors the solemnity of the event through personal connection. Through Spiegelman’s comic, Vladek is able to tell his own story of the Holocaust. The audience can then glean their own understanding of the historical events and the role Nazi ideology, without being told how to feel about Nazis themselves. Nonetheless, the artistic representation of historical events can never achieve an idealistic expectation of accuracy. Art confesses through his mouse persona in the second part of the novel, “There’s so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too complex for comics… so much has to be left out or distorted” (II, 16). Spiegelman acknowledges the inevitable incompleteness of his personal, historical narrative, yet *Maus* continues to stand as the most effective use of the comic medium to represent the past through allegory.

*Enemy Ace: The “Good German” and Holocaust Guilt*

Few comics compare to the unique success of *Maus*, especially due to Spiegelman’s deeply personal and authentic portrayal of his father and their relationship; however, his cautious and modified approach to representing Nazis parallels Garth Ennis’ more recent work, *Enemy Ace: War in Heaven*. In this two-issue story arc, Ennis revitalizes Hans von Hammer, a character originally created by Robert Kanigher and Joe Kurbert in 1965 as a WWI German pilot loosely based on the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, known as a “flying ace” for his high record of combat victories. Recognized by his crimson Fokker DR1 triplane, the Silver Age hero
represented the German side of the Great War and the aristocratic loyalty associated with his military service. Picking up his story several decades later, Ennis expands on von Hammer’s character as he is persuaded to come out of retirement to join the Luftwaffe of the Third Reich. Although openly resistant to the Nazi party, von Hammer’s compliance in the war effort eventually leads to his discovery of the final solution and his surrender to the Allied troops due to the overwhelming guilt he feels for his country’s atrocities. Ennis adheres to Holocaust etiquette by using visual distancing mechanisms in portraying the Holocaust that respect the solemnity of the event, yet breaks some aspects of historical realism through the metaphorical portrayal of von Hammer’s dual nature of wolf and man. Although rare in WWII narratives, *Enemy Ace: War in Heaven* rejects both grand narratives of the “Good German” and the dominant portrayal of vilified “Bad Nazis” by presenting an individualized narrative of the German conscience as one man confronts his own role in the horrors of war.

Although the original *Enemy Ace* is a relatively unique example of a post-WWII comic that gambled to cast a German protagonist, many German and Hollywood films of the late 60’s and 70’s helped establish the emerging the “Good German” character. An alternative to vilified Nazis, “Good Germans” serve as an Everyman figure that opposes the fascist regime and represents the rarely exposed moral minority of the Third Reich. These narratives often blur the lines of good and evil by portraying characters behind traditional enemy lines, and evoking sympathy and admiration from viewers by emphasizing the heroism and valor of the “Good German.” Petra Rau describes the problematic archetype in its early form as a product of West German films, which attempted to regain historical dignity for subsequent generations: “These Everyman figures served as a foil for the ‘real’ carriers of ideologically motivated crimes, SS, SA, Gestapo, Nazi leadership. Plots spoke eloquently of the absurdity of war but did little to
address questions of culpability, complicity or genocide… Cinemagoers could see themselves on the screen as victims of a criminal regime” (128). While these characters attempted to neutralize oversimplified perceptions of evil Nazis, early figures merely pled victimhood and an inability to overcome oppressive political forces without owning up to the implications of their collective actions. Ennis’ protagonist in Enemy Ace likewise does not conform to stereotypical vilified Nazis. Formerly part of the German aristocracy, von Hammer acts solely out of loyalty to his country, regardless of the political party in power. Furthermore, he boldly and openly mocks Hitler and other Nazis, refusing to neither paint swastikas on his plane nor accept the Knight’s Cross from the Führer himself for his honorable kill record. However, von Hammer also subverts the role of the “Good German” by acting on and taking responsibility for his moral conscience.

Instead of positioning himself as another victim of the regime like some “Good Germans,” von Hammer confronts his own culpability. This confrontation is facilitated through von Hammer’s symbolic embodiment of his hunting companion, the Black Wolf, which represents his enthusiasm for war and compulsion toward violence. From his conception, von Hammer is introduced as a “killing machine” whose only companion is equally as solitary and deadly (Adams). Ennis expands on the Enemy Ace canon by transforming von Hammer’s hunting companion from the Black Forest into a symbolic representation of his animalistic nature. When convinced by another soldier to become a Luftwaffe general, von Hammer uses the Black Wolf to explain his fate: “I felt an affinity with that creature. Two takers of life, neither of us feeling remorse or regret. I came to believe in it as my own warrior-spirit: my will to fight” (1.5). Von Hammer’s will to fight is equally motivated by his will to live. After crashing his plane into the middle of the front line at Leningrad, von Hammer single-handedly kills a group
of soldiers and escapes to his base. In the panels leading up to the slaughter, von Hammer sees the Black Wolf in the distance ripping off the head of a Russian soldier. A sequence of action-to-action movements of gore, tinted in red and contained in disjointed and slanted panel frames, ends in a close up of von Hammer’s rage-filled face and panel of pure red. Apparently blinded by the singular will to survive, von Hammer is shocked by his own killing spree, as pictured in figure 13. Von Hammer and the viewer’s gaze meet as he looks down at his blood-covered hands, a conventional image of guilt. He surveys the carnage and utters “God” in disbelief, as his image is parallel to an overlapping, disembodied image of the wolf (1.40). With little dialogue or diegetic explanation throughout the sequence, the images can be interpreted on various levels. While the majority of the narrative remains realistic, it is unlikely to assume that the wolf physically manifested in a distant country to aid his companion; however, the ambiguity and dream-like sequence of the events leave open metaphorical possibilities. What can be said is that the juxtaposition of the wolf and von Hammer in the last panel causes the viewer to collate...
their behavior. In a sense, von Hammer has become the wolf—a wild and violent animal controlled by survival instinct. Nonetheless, von Hammer’s hollow expression and disbelief in his own capacity for violence indicates a newfound sense of remorse for the loss of life.

While there are stark differences between the representation of the violent scenes in Russia and the distanced depiction of a German concentration camp, Ennis complies with Holocaust etiquette by avoiding desensitizing and trivializing references to the Holocaust and its victims due to the perspective of the main character. The initial distance placed between von Hammer and the historical presence of WWII is evident by the majority of the combat taking place in the air. Pages filled with little dialogue but control-center commands and pilot jargon, and visual sequences of colorful explosions and planes looping through the sky seem artful compared to the horrors on the ground below. Within the story arc, von Hammer’s plane crashes twice—first into the front lines of Russia and later inside the Dachau concentration camp. Once von Hammer crashes in the midst of the war-torn streets of Leningrad, Ennis holds little reservations in depicting the carnage. Taboos such as the death of innocent children and cannibalism are not out of bounds, as von Hammer witnesses a young boy torn apart by a stream of bullets (1.34) and a small girl eat from a severed hand (1.35). While von Hammer’s land battle in Russia is depicted in full, only a single page illustrates his account of the concentration camp. As seen in figure 14, only small visual clues of compound buildings, barbed wire fences, and indistinguishable figures in striped uniforms disclose his location. Although the latter images are easily associated with the Holocaust, the chilling, translated, sign reading “Arbeit Macht Frei,” or “work makes (you) free” casts dark irony over the page. The next panel switches the perspective back to the base where von Hammer’s fellow officers confirm his location by a simple nondescript gesture toward a dot and name on the map (2.21). While Ennis could have
Figure 14

...NO, HE WASN'T HURT. WENT IN JUST NORTH OF TOWN, About...

ARBEIT MACHT FREI

THERE
portrayed grotesque and historically consistent details of the camp, he chooses instead to exclude direct visualization of the Holocaust to honor its victims and historical realism.

By the end of the war, von Hammer rejects the role of a passive “Good German” character by surrendering to the American troops. After witnessing the crimes against humanity in Dachau, von Hammer can no longer take any part in the war, and delivers a passionate speech that affects his fellow pilots concerning their collective culpability for genocide. While the Luftwaffe in Enemy Ace had no direct involvement in, or even any knowledge of, Hitler’s final solution to exterminate the Jews and other unwanted persons, von Hammer and the other pilots are burdened with the knowledge. Peter fills the role of an additional, sympathetic Everyman in the narrative as he articulates the Germans’ position in the war and the appeal of Hitler’s leadership: “And when he said things about Jews, and how everything we’d achieved since the bad times could be stolen from us—well, he helped us to turn on the people we’d always been taught to hate, the enemy within…He turned some of us into his curs, and got the rest to look the other way. Oh God, we’re guilty. We’ll always be guilty” (2.28). Peter’s revelation rejects the traditional “Good German” of the blissfully unaware victim; instead, he reflects on the shared guilty of all Germans for passive compliance to Hitler’s anti-Semitic agenda, and their inability to redeem themselves from what has already taken place. The only course of action is to acknowledge their responsibility and surrender. Before von Hammer does just that, he looks back to find the wolf standing at the edge of the forest. Instead of the overlaid images like the one in Figure 12, this confrontation presents a side-by-side comparison of von Hammer and the wolf separated by the gutter of two distinct panels. Visually indicating their separation, von Hammer utters “No more,” and the wolf retreats into the dark woods (2.43-44).
By actively rejecting his animalistic impulse for violence and destruction that also characterize Nazi criminals, von Hammer accepts his responsibility for the deaths he caused during the war. His admirable surrender presents a more positive “Good German” character as the metaphorical comparison between von Hammer and the wolf emphasize his struggle to overcome internalized violence in the face of right and wrong. Localized to the experience of a single, fictional German figure, *Enemy Ace* presents the moral complexity of von Hammer’s character through the lens of a small narrative. Considering the specifics of von Hammer’s story arc allows the audience to freely interpret the role of Nazis and other German soldiers in the context of the war and the Holocaust.

**Conclusion: Why Be Critical of Popular Culture?**

Whether you’re an avid reader of comics and familiar with the works discussed in this essay or not, popular culture products of any form—books, television, films, advertisements, and the like—saturate American culture and often shape our perceptions and understanding of history. As these forms increasingly adopt postmodern and intertextual elements of narrative, recognizing the ideologies and metanarratives at work in popular cultural constructively criticizes what we consume and believe. While we may choose to indulge in speculative fiction and fantastic versions of the world around us, distinguishing between “reality” and “myth” can become increasingly difficult when historical events continue to be represented in the same, decontextualized way. While myth and metaphor can represent difficult or disconcerting concepts in an accessible and digestible way, it can potentially obscure its intentions when over-used. As Judith Kerman expresses in “Uses of the Fantastic in Literature of the Holocaust,” “Fantastic literature, by its very nature, violates the norms of realism that have dominated not only Holocaust texts but virtually the whole body of what has been received and taught as
“serious” literature for the past two centuries. Fantastic literature suggests fairy tales, myths, science fiction—the impossible, or at least the improbable” (10). Using the fantastic to supplement narratives of WWII becomes problematic for the very reason that WWII and the Holocaust did happen; therefore, comparing the actual with the impossible can be counterproductive. It is entertaining to read wildly imaginative and colorful alternate history tales like *Hellboy*, *Fables*, and *The Manhattan Projects*, to cheer on their protagonists as they beat up the Nazi bad guys, but at what point do these exhausted tropes begin to desensitize viewers to reality and overlooked implications of their historical roots?

No matter what historical event popular culture distorts, we lose a sense of authenticity from art that perpetuates grand narratives that tell the audience what to believe and how to feel. When popular culture contributes to discourses of the Holocaust in particular, even through using isolated images of Nazism, certain restrictions should be applied not only to honor the victims of genocide and trauma, but also of political oppression. Why do we need rules of Holocaust etiquette in the first place? The circumstances of Nazi-Germany and the Holocaust are somewhat unique in history that should be treated carefully to retain its significance, as Des Pres and other scholars maintain. Even when narratives break Holocaust etiquette its effect should be to strengthen the viewer’s critical perspective. As Lyotard suggests, postmodernism has exposed us to the complexities of the world and the multiplicity of experience too much to allow the belief in any kind of consensus or single, dominant perspective. Hopefully, more comic artists will follow the example of *Maus* and *Enemy Ace* and begin to recognize the potential of such a popular and creative medium that incorporates image and text into localized narratives that contribute to our understanding of the past and question accepted, universal truths. As consumers
of popular culture, it is also the reader’s responsibility to identify critical and noncritical perspectives within texts and evaluate how they create a new historical narrative.
Works Cited


