Animal Metaphor in Maus

Spiegelman created the mice metaphor intentionally, knowing about the Nazi association of Jews as vermin and that their method of “extermination” was through the use of a common pesticide – Zyklon B.

“I found that in a film called The Eternal Jew, a racist documentary made by a guy named Hippler, there’s shots of old Jewish men milling around in a ghetto, cut to a swarm of rats in a sewer, and saying that the Jews are the rats of mankind, carrying their disease throughout the world.” – Spiegelman

Some Poles have found the pig metaphor to be offensive. Spiegelman relates a conversation he had with a member of the Polish press:

“[A member of the Polish press] said, ‘Do you realize that it is a terrible insult to call a Pole a pig? It’s worse than it even sounds in English. Do you realize that the Germans called us schwein [pigs]?’ So I said, ‘Yeah, and the Germans called us vermin. These aren’t my metaphors. They are Hitler’s.’ And that gave us common ground. I pointed out that, in the book, there are Jews who act admirably but there are many Jews in the book who don’t. These are just people wearing masks. And the same is true of the Poles. There are some Poles who saved my parents’ lives and who were very kind, and there were some who were swine.” – Spiegelman

Why do you think the mice and pig metaphors might be controversial? Do you think that Maus plays into the hands of the Nazi ideology of Jews as vermin or do you think that it refutes it? Explain. What reasons does Spiegelman give for using these metaphors.

What visual elements are used to distinguish ordinary Germans from Nazis?

What do Vladek and Anja do to pass as non-Jews and how is this conveyed visually? What does this suggest about the notion of ethnic identity?

Are masks a fitting way to convey people’s perception of race or ethnic identity? Explain.