Joe Sacco’s *Journalism*

Discussion Questions:

1. **COLOR:** Longtime readers of both comics journalism and traditional print news are accustomed to seeing the horrors of war depicted in black and white. (WWII reel to reels, documentaries, newspaper headlines, photographs, and Spiegelman’s *Maus*) In many ways, war journalism is a black & white genre, both literally (newspapers) and implicitly (the journalist’s code—to present *just the facts*). Additionally, as war reportage is featured most frequently in daily newspapers, the use of black and white in comics journalism could be seen as an extension of traditional print media constraints. Sacco’s work, however, appeared in journals and magazines. Still, in *Journalism*, a collection spanning years of his reporting, only Sacco’s first two pieces employ color.

   A) **How does Sacco use color in “The War Crimes Trials” (p2) and “Hebron” (p10)?** What palette is he working with? What/who does it remind you of?

   B) **What is the impact of color on the reader, particularly in regards to a subject like genocide?**

   C) **Beyond the financial constraint, might there be other reasons to limit the palette to black and white?** (Give an example of a scene elsewhere in *Journalism* that portrays a similar event in black and white. Compare and contrast.)

   Bonus question: How does Sacco’s use of color relate to/differ from color and violence in Yang's *Sinners & Saints*?

2. **SUBJECTIVITY:** The medium Sacco uses—as Sacco himself points out—raises interesting questions about the subjectivity of journalism: to what extent can a reporter be an objective observer? For Sacco’s part, he disputes the entire notion of journalistic objectivity, saying that, “I, for one, embrace the implications of subjective reporting and prefer to highlight them.” One of the ways, aside from the act of drawing his reportage, that Sacco embraces this subjectivity is by depicting himself interacting with his subjects in his work, but he embraces subjectivity in other, more subtle ways, as well. For example, Sacco often shows his subjects speaking “to the camera,” so to speak—a rare vantage in news photography—in order to enhance the reader’s emotional connection with the subject, to simulate putting a reader directly in the conversation, such as on p.187. **What other devices does Sacco use to highlight the subjectivity of his reporting?** What effect do these devices have on the reading?
3. SACCO AS NARRATOR: Building off of the concept of subjectivity/objectivity, Sacco’s portrayals of himself throughout *Journalism* are markedly different than his portrayals of other subjects. **What is the biggest stylistic difference, and how does this incongruity within the panels affect the reader’s interpretation of the author, the subject, and the meaning of the work?** (Using Scott McCloud’s representation spectrum as a guide, point to examples from different stories)

4. GUTTERS: Playing on McCloud’s ideas on the relative leap that readers make in gutter spaces, Rose and Walzer point out that Sacco often uses panel bleed and cross-hatching in gutter spaces to “convey spatial and temporal confusion,” such as on p. 135. **What are some other examples of such “occupied” gutters in the text, and what is Sacco trying to get across by using this technique?**

5. HANDS: According to Rebecca Scherr’s article, "Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's Palestine," the idea of hands and the “layers of touch” become very prominent in Sacco’s work. She also identifies an article by Hilary Chute that comments on the use of hands in Fun Home where Bechdel, “keeps her analysis focused on how hand imagery functions within the text, as a form of connection between the artist and her representations.“ Likewise, hand imagery in Sacco’s narrative, “holds the power to shape the written component of the text. The affective charge of the bodily image is primary in our apprehension of the narrative, and Sacco depends on the reader's encounter with bodily gesture in order to express the emotional ‘realness’ that is key in persuading us to engage with the pain of others. The gestures of hands seem to be his preferred medium for conveying this.” **Find examples throughout the text that focuses on the hands of an individual and identify the meaning behind their gestures.**

6. INDIVIDUAL V. MASS: The media plays on the idea that conflict occurs within a mass of humanity in order to get the word out in a timely manner. From Tristram Walker’s, "Graphic Wounds: The Comic Journalism of Joe Sacco," "The roots of the conflict may be obscured by propaganda and misunderstanding but the violent terror of the wars was readily accessible by audiences across the world. Sacco asks us to see beyond the wounds and to see people instead, to see the families and communities affected by war.' Sacco states in an interview that individually drawn faces (even in crowded scenes) are, 'to show that this is not a mass of humanity. These are individuals that make up this mass of humanity.' (Scherr) **Based on our discussion thus far, and focusing on embedded narrative, what family, community, or individual struck you the most and what influenced your decision?**
Resources


Some Possible Answers:

1. The first two pieces in the collection are in bright, garish, two dimensional "Archie Comics" (or Herge) Technicolor. The color Sacco uses is clearly conjured, rather than an accurate reflection of color in scene. The color may be an attempt to juxtapose the popular (fun, light) comics against the harsh realities of war. Likewise, the work may be calling attention to itself as “subjective” (I, Sacco, am relaying this story to you, it is a “colored” version). Reasons to limit comics journalism to b&w might include: a) preservation of “newsyness” as a factor in distinguishing “serious” work with “popular culture” b) the ability to include more detailed line work (photorealism), rather than allowing the color to take over the visual impact or c) a natural integration between image and text (words and images both black and white, sameness, rather than one being a “picture” of the words). Some compare/ contrast: Bodies in mass grave, p.6 (color) p.40 (b&w). Soldiers shouting, p.3 (color) p.83 (b&w)

2. Sacco renders his subjects in a realist style, but he also gets to choose the exact moment within which he renders them—the facial expressions he chooses for his subjects play a huge role in how a reader interprets them. (See spread on p. 83-83) Sacco can also use visual symbols within his narratives; for example on p.43, where a discussion of Stalin’s “Final Solution” for the Chechens is accompanied by a drawing of an ominous, holocaust-reminiscent locomotive.

3. Sacco renders his subjects/environments photorealistically, and himself iconically. His features are “cartoonish”, exaggerated, and lacking in detail or expression. According to McCloud, this technique allows the reader to engage with the reading through identification with Sacco-the-Journalist, to view these scenes in Sacco’s shoes, rather than as a third party bystander. From this position, the reader is more likely to concede the moral ambiguities present in the story. Examples: p.5, p.187

4. p. 48 shows a family of refugees abandoning their life in Chechnya for a refugee camp. There’s a lot of gutter bleed and very little white space on the page, giving the sense of “everything all at once” intensity and disorientation. p. 143 does a lot of shifting back and forth temporally, with several “subject to subject” panel transitions. Additionally, the first two panels use an interesting “reaction shot” technique, in which a dialog bubble is bled from one panel to the next, essentially fusing both panels temporally.

5. pg. 117 the desperation of the faces that coincide with the reaching hands. Norman Lowell explains his “operation” to force the immigrants into submission with this tactic of inflicting desperation. Pg. 47 Asset expresses her concern as to what will happen to her and her family. Also, what she is currently feeling about the world around her. “This big world has become like a thimble for us.” Pg. 96 Quaid’s enlarged hands. Attempting to criticize the situation he’s been forced into while trying not to reveal too much about his true feelings.

6. Zara from Chechen War, Chechen Women (56-60). Sacco uses 3 panels for Issa’s stare, striking imagery of his wounds, Sacco’s own involvement (attempting to give her money), and the presence of black space in the last few panels that highlight Zara’s emotional state.