Reconsidering Comics Journalism: Information and Experience in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*¹

But his comics about Palestine furnish his readers with a long enough sojourn among a people whose suffering and unjust fate have been scanted for far too long and with too little humanitarian and political attention. Sacco’s art has the power to detain us, to keep us from impatiently wandering off in order to follow a catchphrase or a lamentably predictable narrative of triumph and fulfillment. And this is perhaps the greatest of his achievements.

–Edward Said (vii)

Joe Sacco is something of an oddity among today’s “graphic novelists.” His colleague, the cartoonist Seth, puts it simply: “He’s definitely an oddball cartoonist, because he has very excellent social skills” (qtd. in McGrath 46). But Sacco has also distinguished himself through the remarkable comics he has produced. In a field of cultural production that is dominated, at one end, by science-fantasy escapism and, at the other, by self-indulgent navel-gazing, Sacco’s comics stand out, not simply for their technical proficiency but also for their agenda of social advocacy. In books such as *Palestine, Safe Area Goražde, The Fixer,* and *War’s End,* Sacco uses comics to report on the experiences of the victims of conflict and war with a rare depth, sensitivity, and sense of context.

Sacco uses the term “comics journalism” to describe this particular kind of non-fiction comic book. However, to conceptualize comics journalism *qua* journalism is to subject it to a whole set of predetermined expectations and standards, and, as I hope to demonstrate below, these preconceptions do not always sit comfortably with the work itself. In this essay I will explore some of the issues raised by the non-fiction graphic novel and interrogate the concept of comics journalism. In order to do this, I appeal to another model of non-fiction representation: the documentary film. By comparing and contrasting journalism and documentary, I aim to

develop an ideal-typical distinction between the reporting of information and the communication of experience, which is ultimately rooted in the work of critical theorist Walter Benjamin. I will then use examples from *Palestine* to situate Sacco on the continuum between information and experience.

**PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A CARTOON GENIUS**

Sacco was born in Malta in 1960. According to Monica Marshall’s biography and retrospective, stories of his parents’ experiences during World War II—Malta, then part of the British empire, was regularly bombed by Axis forces—provoked his early and lasting interest in stories of war and occupation. Sacco holds a degree in journalism from the University of Oregon and had originally desired to pursue a career as a foreign correspondent, inspired and influenced by “literary” journalists such as Michael Herr, George Orwell, and Hunter S. Thompson (Marshall 22–23). Given this background, the serious content of his best-known comics should be no surprise. Yet his earliest published pieces belong squarely in the tradition of satirical and autobiographical cartooning that grew out of the American underground comix movement. The collection *Notes from a Defeatist* opens with a story called “Cartoon Genius,” in which Sacco gives us a bitingly self-deprecating portrait of his life as an impoverished cartoonist. Over the course of the story, he vacillates between counter-cultural celebrations of artistic autonomy and an almost manic willingness to sell out for dental insurance and a steak dinner. Sacco also suggests that his education has prepared him poorly for life in the “real world.” So how does he get from stories about subsisting on Campbell’s tomato soup to the very real world of the Palestinian Occupied Territories and the fractured states of former Yugoslavia?

Sacco says his artistic practice “developed organically, based on the fact that [he] was a cartoonist and … studied journalism” (Sacco, personal interview). However, we can see the
roots of his method in earlier stories like “In the Company of Long Hair,” “More Women, More Children, More Quickly,” and “How I Loved the War.”

Despite representing a very different kind of non-fiction storytelling than his later work, these stories obviously belong to the same corpus of texts and are important points of inflection in Sacco’s career. Taken together, Sacco’s pre-comics-journalism stories demonstrate an artistic trajectory, over the course of which Sacco increasingly applied the techniques and approaches of autobiographical cartooning to the lives of others and to ever more serious subjects. When Sacco began to combine his cartooning hobby with his professional interest in stories of conflict, he conceptualized this simply as journalism being practiced within a different medium. However, specific characteristics of the comics medium and the graphic novel format and particular decisions Sacco made in the execution of *Palestine* suggest that this is, at the very least, not journalism as usual.

**UNDERSTANDING NON-FICTION COMICS**

In a recent book on non-fiction or “factual” television, Annette Hill describes the contemporary media-scape as “a space where familiar factual genres such as news, or documentary, take on properties common to other genres. It’s a place where reality TV runs wild, crossing over into fiction and non-fiction territories, taking genre experimentation to the limit” (1). This is arguably also the case for the burgeoning field of graphic novels, which, despite its name, has been dominated by works of non-fiction. In graphic novels, autobiography and memoir rub shoulders with the slice-of-life short story, biography, history, and travelogue. On television, this presents a problem to audiences and citizens who rely on the various kinds of non-fiction representations to co-ordinate social action and, perhaps more importantly, meaningfully understand their place in the social totality. According to Hill, “Watching factual

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2. All three are collected in *Notes from a Defeatist*. 
television [...] can feel like being trapped between fact and fiction [...]. Surrounded by factual programmes, viewers have to deal with the various ways programmes represent reality” (2). It is my contention that, mutatis mutandis, the same basic problem pertains to comics and graphic novels.

Genre and Non-fiction

While it would perhaps be simpler to talk about them solely on the terms defined by their practitioners, genres are largely a function of audiences’ expectations of individual works and their relationships to larger groups of somehow similar works. This is particularly true once we remember that cultural producers are themselves part of the audience and that their understanding of the tastes and desires of consumers is always partially grounded in their own experience as consumers. Thus, a genre is more or less the codification of a certain competency—one which shapes the individual objects of its knowledge even as it is itself shaped by the cumulative encounters between audience and text. As Steve Neale writes:

Genres do not only consist of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with a means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable. (158)

Such expectations may include formal and textual conventions associated with the genre as well as the institutional contexts surrounding production, distribution, and consumption of the work in question. However, Neale’s most salient point is that these expectations always invoke generic regimes of verisimilitude, “various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification, and belief” that help the audience make sense of the texts that make up a generic corpus (158). For example, in the context of a classical Hollywood musical, it does not seem “unrealistic” for the characters
to break into song, and in the context of a science–fiction novel, the laws of physics can be stretched in ways that do not necessarily break the audience’s suspension of disbelief. At the same time, audience expectations will be frustrated if the protagonists of a romantic comedy do not end the film living happily ever after, though rates of divorce suggest that this may not be particularly “realistic” either. A genre’s regime of verisimilitude helps the viewer or reader to define realism for a given work or set of works; however, non-fiction works are less concerned with realism than with the real itself.

My intention is not to endorse a naïve epistemology of direct access to the real. Whether posited in the form of a poststructuralist death of the subject, a postmodernist disappearance of the referent, or good, old-fashioned scepticism, potent critiques have made such a position untenable. Yet non-fiction works still present themselves as representing reality. No matter how we might conceive the actual relationship between a representation and “reality,” an epistemological wager is part of the code that governs the reception of non-fiction genres: the viewer or reader expects that a work purporting to be non-fiction will be true. The challenge for the author of such a work is to encode it with recognizable signifiers of truthfulness in order that the audience might believe in it. To put it another way, non-fiction genres rely on regimes of authenticity rather than verisimilitude.

For most people, journalism is the paradigmatic form of non-fiction representation, and its regime of authenticity is the most familiar. But, as the saying goes, familiarity may breed contempt. In a contemporary journalism textbook, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel attempt to defend journalism from public cynicism with a fresh investigation of its principles. The authors develop a set of best practices that constitutes a journalistic response to the problem of authenticity. However, this must be understood as the product of an effort to legitimate
journalism as an institution (and industry). Thus, they express a vision of what journalism ought to be rather than an assessment of what it is in practice. But this in itself provides insight into the conflict between journalism’s official discourse and the public’s expectations of the news media.

The meaning of objectivity is the most significant battleground in this conflict, for it remains the most powerful value shaping popular perceptions of journalism. Yet, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel, “[t]he concept of objectivity has been so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct” (13). The popular understanding of objectivity comprises concepts such as balance, neutrality, and impartiality. But the authors argue that, as originally formulated, journalistic objectivity resided not in the practitioner but rather in the “discipline of verification,” which is the “essence” of the journalistic method (71). A journalist need not fret over his or her personal biases so long as the method is followed correctly. Thus, journalism guarantees authenticity through the appeal to a quasi-scientific methodology for verifying evidence. This guarantee is encoded in various ways in journalistic texts, such as an “impartial” writing style, the inclusion of photographic evidence, and the use of authoritative expert sources.

However, the re-signification of journalistic objectivity as objectivity of method elides the ideological labour that is inherent in any representation, and particularly in those that claim transparently to reveal reality. The contradictions between the representations journalists construct and the lived experience of the audience is the source of the public cynicism that so unnerves Kovach and Rosenstiel. Thus, even constituencies that directly oppose one another can simultaneously perceive the news media as biased against themselves. One might suggest that this proves the effectiveness of the journalistic method—if none of the ideologues are satisfied, then the news media must be doing something right. But journalism’s ideal is a phronetic one. ³ It

³ On the intellectual virtue of phronesis and its relation to social analysis, see Flyvbjerg.
is supposed to provide a “practical or functional form of the truth…. by which we can operate day to day” (42). If journalism is not enabling diverse groups to understand one another and their (social) world, is there a kind of representation that can?

As I have suggested above, another prominent form of non-fiction representation is the documentary. What distinguishes documentary films is perhaps less clear—to lay and professional critics alike. Documentary and journalism have had an intimate, but surprisingly under-theorized, relationship over the course of their respective histories. Indeed, a great deal of documentary production takes place under the auspices of television news and current affairs programming, and the American direct cinema movement, which held a dominant position in the field during the post-war period, drew heavily on a quasi-journalistic conception of objective representation. But, according to Stella Bruzzi, “virtually the entire post-vérité history of non-fiction film can be seen as a reaction against its ethos of transparency and unbiased observation” (6). In working through this reaction, documentary filmmakers and theorists have attempted to construct distinct regimes of authenticity for this genre of non-fiction.

While documentary, like journalism, is a form of evidentiary representation—i.e., a record of people and events—it has a different relationship to this evidentiary function. As Bill Nichols writes, “[t]o remind viewers of the construction of the reality we behold, of the creative element in John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends” (24). The documentary tradition has attempted to forge new articulations of “complex documentary truth” and authenticity, “arising from an insurmountable compromise between subject and recording, suggesting in turn that it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is the heart of any documentary” (Bruzzi 6). On this view, the truth of a recording
seems to become more authentic the more it acknowledges the fact of its own recording. The contemporary documentarian may make use of a wide range of representational modes in order to document—if not strictly to reproduce—the experiences of his or her subjects. All the above suggests a markedly different approach to representing reality than the “scientific” reporting of mainstream journalism.

Information and Experience: Two Ideal Types

I would suggest that the divergent regimes of authenticity embodied in mainstream journalism and the documentary tradition are reflective of a more fundamental distinction. Comparing and contrasting the two allows us to abstract from them a pair of ideal types. Max Weber is the writer most closely associated with this methodology. It is imperative to understand that ideal types are not strictly empirical categories but analytical ones. Their purpose is not to describe reality but “to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description” (Weber 90). Ideal types are constructed as means for the interpretation and judgement of actually existing cases. Thus, the ideal-typical distinction between the relaying of information and the communication of experience will allow us to analyze the works that actually fall at various points on the continuum between them more adequately.

I have drawn my constructs from the work of Walter Benjamin—in particular, his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov.” In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin describes the disappearance of traditional storytelling as the social conditions that made it possible are eroded by capitalism. In this way, oral communication and literature follow the same trajectory as visual art in the age of its technical reproducibility, becoming ossified in the commodity form. The story has been displaced by information, the storyteller by the press.

However, as Pericles Lewis notes, “[t]he modern age of The Storyteller resembles that of the Artwork essays in its essential alienation, but Benjamin is [...] kinder to the novelist and the novel-reader than to the artist and the aesthete” (225). To account for this discrepancy, Lewis argues that the collapse of artwork’s autonomy involves a shift from a focus on the art object itself—particularly as an object of devotion or contemplation—to one on the capacity of such objects to act as media of communication. The story is a key concept for Benjamin precisely because it was a pre-modern and pre-capitalist example of the communicative function of culture, which Benjamin hoped to recover through the refunctioing of cultural (re)production.

The story is “an artisan form of communication” that had its source in experience that was “passed on from mouth to mouth,” and “the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers” (Benjamin, “Storyteller” 91, 86). In contrast, information is a fetishized form of communication, interpreting value-laden knowledge produced by subjects as if it were objective fact. Benjamin holds the story separate from information because the former served to communicate experience (Erfahrung), whereas the latter reports only the immediate impressions of the lived moment (Erlebnis): “Because of this, [information] proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs” (89). Information, like journalism, is a form of representation that strives to transmit the real as objectively and transparently as possible, while the communication of experience is based on a model of inter-subjective understanding. The latter serves not only to inform but also to constitute new collectivities out of its audiences on the

5. Lewis here refers to the multiple versions of Benjamin’s famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
6. Lewis’s own distinction between objectifying and communicative action is based in the work of Seyla Benhabib and Jürgen Habermas.
8. On the concepts of Erfahrung and Erlebnis and Benjamin’s theory of experience, see Jay.
basis of the experience that they now share (albeit in a mediated form). The sociality and solidarity produced in this way is of the utmost political and cultural significance. It is this aspect of Sacco’s work that so impressed Edward Said:

Nowhere does Sacco come closer to the existential lived reality of the average Palestinian than in his depiction of life in Gaza, the national Inferno [...]. Joe the character is there sympathetically to understand and to try to experience not only why Gaza is so representative a place in its hopelessly overcrowded and yet rootless spaces of Palestinian dispossession, but also to affirm that it is there, and must somehow be accounted for in human terms, in the narrative sequences with which any reader can identify. (vii)

Having travelled and returned to share his experience, Sacco is a rare example of a storyteller in Benjamin’s sense. In the next section, I will attempt to account for this quality through an analysis of Sacco’s best-know graphic novel, Palestine.

RETURN TO PALESTINE

I do not consider Palestine a work of journalism. For one thing, it was produced without the support of a news agency and released by a publisher of alternative and pornographic comic books. For another, Sacco has effectively abandoned the traditional indices of newsworthiness: comics are labor-intensive and slow to produce; chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically; he meets no “notable” people; and there is, sadly, nothing novel about injustice and grinding deprivation. As Said writes, “[t]he unhurried pace and the absence of a goal in his wanderings emphasizes that he is neither a journalist in search of a story nor an expert trying to nail down the facts in order to produce a policy. Joe is there to be in Palestine, and only that” (vi–vii). My intention is not to disparage Sacco’s exceptional graphic novel, but to clarify the regime of authenticity that pertains to so-called comics journalism. In abandoning the constraints of “scientific reporting,” Joe Sacco has gained the ability to share his own experiences and those of his subjects with clarity and force.
One of the most powerful sequences in *Palestine* is called “Moderate Pressure: Part 2” (102–113). While one of his daughters sleeps in his arms, a man named Ghassan tells Sacco the story of his detainment by Israeli authorities (it is unclear whether they are police or military) on suspicion of belonging to an illegal organization. Despite a lack of evidence, a succession of judges extends custody: he is ultimately held for nineteen days without charge. In this time, he is interrogated, beaten, and tightly bound in painful positions. Before long, Ghassan, hooded and tied to a chair, begins to hallucinate: “My daughter is dead… My brother is sitting next to me… My brother is dead… My father is dead… My uncle is dead… My mother is sick. She is in the hospital… My mother is arrested” (109). These hallucinations are vividly illustrated by Sacco. In each case, Ghassan’s loved ones appear next to him: his daughter lying face-down on the floor of his cell, his father and uncle wrapped in shrouds, his mother lying in a hospital bed, and so on.

The quoted text is contained in a series of irregularly shaped bubbles. They are distinct from Ghassan’s narration, which is restricted to rectilinear captions and set off with quotation marks. Though they superficially resemble thought balloons, they do not emanate from Ghassan or any other character in frame, and Sacco does not generally use this device in *Palestine.* Presented in a straightforward, understated manner, these words, like the images they accompany, take on a kind of “phantom” reality. They are unreal, and yet they are.

The effect here is extraordinary, but this sequence is only one example of Sacco’s use of this formal trick, whereby authentic but unrepresentable experiences are matter-of-factly inserted into the diegesis. Sacco does not attempt to corroborate Ghassan’s case; he simply shows what he has been told, and, in doing so, gives a solidarity to his respondent’s story. In some cases, verification would be impossible. Many of the injustices Sacco relates go unrecorded or are

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9. Sacco does not impute thoughts or motivations to his subjects, only depicting what they do or say—presumably, this is a legacy of his journalistic training. His own commentary on events is presented in captions rather than thought balloons.
generic enough to make appeals to official documents all but meaningless. For example, depictions of the prison, Ansar III, are based on descriptions and maps drawn by former inmates because Sacco was not permitted to go there and take reference photographs (Sacco, “Palestine” xxii). The prison appears on the page instead as it was experienced by those who knew it best, and those experiences are made real by the text—or, at least, as real as anything else we have been shown (82–92). Elsewhere, Sacco performs the same semiotic manoeuvre on a morbid Palestinian joke that involves a Shin Bet agent attempting violently to coerce a donkey into admitting it is a rabbit (96).10 In this case, a joke, which has no empirical truth content whatsoever but gives insight into an aspect of life in the Occupied Territories, is transformed into an event through its presentation to the reader, who is made a witness by the text.

These examples could potentially break the pact of trust established between author and audience by exposing the epistemological underpinnings of the work. That is, they remind us that Palestine is not a document of events but a deliberate re-creation after the fact.11 If non-fictional representation is truly evidentiary in nature, then much of Palestine’s evidence is inadmissible as hearsay. And yet, reading Palestine, one does not have the experience of imminent crisis. Rather, the above examples add layers of depth to Sacco’s reportage. This dynamic is one of the opportunities created (but not necessarily determined) by specific properties of the medium.

While all autobiographical representation has a performative dimension, Charles Hatfield writes that “[s]uch tendencies become doubly obvious in the cartoon world of comics, in which the intimacy of an articulated first-person narrative may mix with the alienating graphic excess of caricature” (114). I would, however, push this point beyond the “alienating” effect of a cartoon aesthetic to the basic semiology of the comic book. Because the images in a graphic

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10. Shin Bet is Israel’s internal intelligence service.

11. Re-creation is a form of documentation that is anathema to journalistic norms, but common in documentary filmmaking.
novel are drawn rather than photographed, their iconic signification is not accompanied by an indexical relationship to the referent, as it is in live-action television and cinema. The subject of a photographic image must have existed in reality if it was present to be photographed. Thus, non-fiction comics are inescapably hyperreal, for, although they maintain a truth claim, they do not provide any access to the referent outside of the system of simulacra contained on the page. This is not to say that comics are entirely non-indexical, however, as Philippe Marion points out:

Beyond the very distinction of narration and monstration, the reader-spectator of the comics is invited to achieve a coincidence of his gaze and the creative movement of the graphiateur [the cartoonist’s subject position]; it is only by acknowledging and identifying the graphic trace or index of the artist that the reader can fully understand the message of the work. From this viewpoint, graphiation is eminently self-reflexive and autoreferential. (Qtd. in Baetens 149)

Therefore, while comics do not have a necessary logical relationship to objective reality, they do have such a relationship to the subjectivity of the artist: a drawn image implies that someone drew it. And Sacco has drawn everything, so the entire diegesis is mediated through and indexed to his own subjectivity. He thus sutures the gap between subject and object, between knowledge of a thing and the thing in itself, not by the eradication of the subjective (or the imposition of an objective method, which amounts to the same thing) but by absorbing the objective into the subjective and making the process of mediation self-evident. To quote Benjamin once more: “Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” ("Storyteller" 92). Sacco never promises or hides behind a false sense of immediacy, allowing the play of subjectivity to reach the audience on an experiential and affective level.

“Subjectivity” has become comics journalism’s catch-phrase. Making the “case” for the genre in Columbia Journalism Review, Kristian Williams writes that “its inherent subjectivity contrasts sharply with the newsroom’s dispassionate prose” (52). Williams ascribes this effect to comics’ blending of word and image and its narrative qualities. As my brief foray into semiology
has demonstrated, these characteristics have something to do with the impression of subjectivity created by comics journalism. However, the more fundamental break is caused by what one does with this form rather than its “inherent” qualities. One can certainly imagine a piece of comics journalism that functions according to the ideal type of information. Furthermore, where the news media have experimented with comics journalism, they have largely restricted it to covering “soft” subjects—the ghetto of “cultural coverage and human-interest stories” (53)—where a certain degree of subjectivity has always been permitted, so long as it does not threatens to contaminate “hard” news. Responding to Williams’s essay, Amy Kiste Nyberg points to the commonalities between comics journalism and forms of “narrative journalism.” However, Nyberg also notes that this style of reporting “has not taken root in daily journalism” (108).

Indeed, comics journalism and narrative journalism both face an uphill battle for acceptance for the same reason: they resist the pragmatics of the mainstream press. Put simply, journalism, in its institutional form, is rationalized for the relaying of information.

Given the dominance of the discourses of objectivity and verification in the journalistic field, I maintain that the label “comics journalism” is misleading. Moreover, it may inadvertently subject works that serve to communicate experience to the standards and expectations that more properly pertain to “informative” modes of representation. *Palestine* is not informative, in that it does not teach or relay information *per se*, but that does not mean that we do not learn from it. I have argued that we learn the most from Sacco precisely when he strays from objective and strictly verifiable facts to communicate the experience of his subjects to us. Most of *Palestine*’s readers will never see Israel or the Occupied Territories for themselves. We must make do with what the news media give us. But thanks to Sacco and other cultural producers who prioritize
experience over information, we may have a better chance of making sense of the stream of events that fills our newspapers and television sets.

WORKS CITED


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