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“A terrible beauty is born”¹: Interrogating Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*

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“ISIS in Mosul” reads one suggested story headline as I open Snapchat to mitigate my chronic boredom. Disbelievingly, I click the snap to confirm whether it actually contains short videos from the ground operation against the Islamic State. It does. The extent to which culture has moved towards demonstrating a marked preference for the visual (the networks of creation, dissemination, surveillance, and control of the ‘image’) is unsurprising when contextualized against the rapid advances in technology (military, media, AI, social networking, entertainment, etc). The constant barrage of images also means that newer modes have to be constantly devised in order to retain the punctum²-esque quality of pictures and slow the rate of desensitization in the audience. Within the purview of journalism this becomes an especially important discussion because the readers/viewers’ everyday encounter with multiple tragedies of death, loss, suffering, and torture can render them apathetic to these events if not packaged in a way that forces repeated confrontation with their own humanity. While the Russian Formalists championed “defamiliarization”³ in order to reorient the reader’s response to language, Sacco’s journalistic comics can be touted as an exercise initiating the viewer’s ‘re-familiarization’ with the image and an empathetic sense of self.

Palestine (1993) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) belong squarely to the tradition of what has broadly discursively concretized as Graphic Journalism. Also called Comics Journalism, the mode amalgamates the form of the comic book/graphic novel with content culled through a journalistic framework of storytelling.⁴ The burgeoning popularity of the genre is in line with the current generation’s reliance on technology and internet as primary modes of knowledge acquisition. While Sacco is not the only one working with the fecund possibilities of the Graphic Journalism format,⁵ he has definitely been one of its finest executors.

¹Phrase used by W.B. Yeats in his poem “Easter 1916” to denote his conflict over the Easter uprising lead by the IRA in Dublin.

²Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980. Defined as “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me/ is poignant to me). p. 27.

³Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device”, 1917. Though some versions of the essay translate the word as “estrangement” rather than “defamiliarization”.

⁴For a brief but illuminating history of Comics/Graphic Journalism, see Dan Archer’s video on the same: <http://www.archcomix.com/comics-journalism/>

⁵see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/comic-books-as-journalism-10-masterpieces-of-graphic-nonfiction/243351/>

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Diverging from the commonly held belief that reportage is a truly objective process, Sacco's work deliberately inserts the correspondent into the text, proving that all reportage is at some level perspectival:

At a single glance, the reader understands that he is both reporter and innocent abroad, an unlikely combination that propels him not only to ask difficult questions, but to go on asking them long after all the other hacks have given up and gone home (Cooke on Sacco, 2009).

Interestingly, even as the subjective impressions of the correspondent are incorporated within the frame, Sacco often uses what is called the POV (Point Of View) method of visual narration, making the reader feel directly addressed by the talking interviewees:

Joe Sacco, a pioneering graphic journalist, often lets his subjects tell their stories, letting their words tumble out around portraits of his speaking subjects. By focusing in on facial expressions, the reader is effectively looking over Sacco's shoulder and engaging in a dialogue with the subject. The same principles apply to an "over the shoulder" style of interviewing which is common in documentary films and video journalism. By removing the interviewer from the panel, Sacco is able to increase the readers' identification with the subject at hand (Polgreen, *The Hooded Utilitarian*).

"You can explain a lot with journalism but you can't explain why that person pulled the trigger" (*Dawn*, 2015). In his 2012 work *Journalism*, Sacco appends a Graphic Journalist manifesto (*A MANIFESTO, ANYONE?*) where he discusses how sometimes the most valuable information is gleaned from personal interactions with the interviewees, but which has to be excised from the news copy in pursuit of that elusive journalistic façade of "objectivity" (*Journalism* xi). Ironically, it had been American media's un-objective representation of Palestinians as terrorists that had propelled Sacco to personally visit the West Bank and embark on the graphic project of *Palestine*.

Palestine collates Sacco's experiences in the West Bank across two months in 1991 and 1992. Initially published in serialized form in 1993, the nine editions were finally compiled into one graphic novel in 2001, with an introduction by Edward Said. It is an interesting side note that it had been the prejudiced images of the Arab in Western Media in the 70s that had also been a guiding factor in Said's development of the seminal theory of Orientalism that has radically changed the face of Postcolonial Studies, rendering this collaboration fitting in many ways. *Palestine* covers the events of the First Intifada and the Gulf War through first-person interactions with oppressed Palestinians under Israeli occupation. The narrative seamlessly switches from present day 1991-1992 experiences of physical and economic oppression to stories of incarceration and political conflict during the Intifada in 1987-1988.

Another galling incident of the sacrifice of human life at the altar of arbitrary journalistic ideals is mentioned in the foreword to his second work under consideration; Sacco mentions being enraged that *Harper's Magazine* had inexplicably cut Chris Hedges's paragraphs about the civilian deaths at Khan Younis despite it being the "greatest massacre of Palestinians on Palestinian soil" (*Footnotes in Gaza* xi). It had been this footnoting of the tangible loss of life

that pushed him to take it up as his next graphic project, and titling it as he did. While *Palestine* focuses on a broader frame of historical reference, *Footnotes in Gaza* specifically attempts to isolate the facts of the 1956 killings of Palestinians in Khan Younis and Rafah by Israeli soldiers. Focusing primarily on the eyewitness testimonies of the pogroms’ survivors, fellow sufferers, and their families *Footnotes in Gaza*, like *Palestine*, is overlaid with multiple layers of storytelling. Unlike *Palestine*, though, *Footnotes in Gaza* was conceptualized and released directly as a compiled graphic novel and not in serial format.

In *Footnotes in Gaza* (hereafter *Footnotes*) the story that he wishes to tell precedes his trip, but *Palestine* is freer and Sacco allows himself to be lead to every kind of anecdotal offering. Consequently, *Palestine* sees Sacco being more accepting of Palestinians commenting on their contemporary events even as they talk of ’87-’88. But, *Footnotes* is very specifically a graphic novel about the 1956 incident and Sacco insists on only meeting those people who had actually witnessed the screenings and keeping the interviewees strictly to the questions at hand. For this purpose, he and Abed actually curate a list of all the sufferers and only visit those people. This is why the UNRWA official who interchanges ’56 with ’67 elicits greater frustration from Sacco’s character within the narrative (“We can’t stay. We’ve lost interest. 1967 is not our department” (338)). This is not to say that there is anything less artistic in having variegated methods to approaching the conflict, rather these divergences allow us to access different facets of the same larger issue through these strategic aesthetic choices separated by a decade of temporality. *Palestine* is more of a totality that is strung belatedly by compiling the various episodes, whereas *Footnotes* allowed Sacco to apprehend a pre-ascertained larger vision wherein to place his pieces, a la whole to parts and parts to whole approach.

However, one facet that overwhelmingly connects the two works under analysis is their unequivocal agenda of giving voice to Palestinians. Israeli soldiers only find mention in connection to the Palestinian narratives of oppression and are never directly interviewed by Sacco within the texts. There is only one oblique reference to an Israeli soldier in terms of his beauty and his flirtations with an American female tourist in *Palestine*, while in *Footnotes* there is Mordechai Bar-On, ex-Chief-de-Bureau to Major General Dayan, now a historian offering critical insight into Israeli tactics of intimidation and occupation. Both instances are appropriated to bolster Sacco’s larger project of uncovering truths lost in the political game of power. His support is squarely with the Palestinians as he picks their stories from the gutter spaces of life and makes panels of their experiential reality.

Balance should not be a smokescreen for laziness. If there are two or more versions of events, a journalist needs to explore and consider each claim, but ultimately the journalist must get to the bottom of a contested account independently of those making their claims...The journalist must strive to find out what is going on and tell it, not neuter the truth in the name of equal time (*Journalism* xii).

Sacco pledges allegiance to truth rather than giving equal footage to both sides of an issue where power is unequally distributed. He feels that the powerful always find the scales of history tipped in their favor and therefore, it is important that those who reside in the margins finally get their day in the sun (xii). He makes it a point to juxtapose (often literally through

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drawing) any action initiated by Palestinians and the punishment meted out to them vis-à-vis the statistics and outcomes of the same acts committed by Israelis. A notable example in *Palestine* is where a villager whose house has been attacked by Israeli settlers goes to the settlement to lodge a complaint, but is dismissed by the policeman who reminds him that both sides in the conflict have their extremists. The villager responds to the policeman, and Sacco renders it for us: “Well, I hope to hear about the charging of your extremists like we hear about the charging of ours” (*Palestine* 67). Sacco repeatedly uses the technique of placing both ‘sides’ of the argument next to each other (literally), not to uphold the misguided idea of equality of time/space devoted to coverage, but rather equality in opportunity to the Palestinians to tell their stories, especially when every other narrative has been hijacked by Israel.

Here, a critical excursion must be made to note that the Palestinian experience is not just focalized through the filters of sympathy, and horror at their predicament, but Sacco also depicts the internal contradictions and fissures that characterize their lived realities. One significant arena where this is highlighted is that of gender. *Palestine* devotes entire chapters to it, titled “Women” and “Hijab,” wherein he excavates the patriarchal structures of power that doubly oppress women within Muslim households. They deal with the lack of political and legal representation of women except through men, the over-emphasis on being desirable for marriage, and the debates within feminism of the donning of the hijab. Additionally, the situation is made even more fraught because the feminist factions within the community mirror the larger political factions fighting for Palestine. This awareness of the presence of gendered responses to the same oppression are also alluded to in *Footnotes*, when the old man (pg. 317) refers to Palestinian women as their honor and suggests that death and money are nothing as long as their ‘honor’ has not been attacked. Although, apart from the one chapter in the first text and some off-hand references in the second, Sacco doesn’t allow himself the artistic luxury to fruitfully engage with the extent of the situation of women, preferring to stick to the script so as not to ruffle more feathers than he is already doing.

Apart from gender, Sacco’s work also establishes the uncomfortable disjunction that is birthed when a people under violent occupation don’t think twice before elaborately glorying in a bloody religious ritual. The chapter titled “Feast” in *Footnotes* sees Eid El-Adah celebrations, wherein there is the depiction of a ritualistic slaughter of bulls and the meat is distributed among family, friends, and the poor. There is a sequence when one of the men tries to gut the bull himself but feels queasy at taking the animal’s life. Both these instances across the two works help a nuanced depiction of Palestinian society as three-dimensional, demanding not just straightforward sympathy from readers but some semblance of support borne out of a complex emotional engagement with them as real people with real personalities that are prone to dissonant actions like anybody else.

The unique ability that comics have to allow for time and space to be represented on the same page endows it with exceptional suitability for portraying these narratives of spatial conflict across time.

The characters must negotiate a complex and restrictive urban environment and this confrontation with the city serves as a metaphor for the retrieval of a past knowledge that is itself blocked, policed and obscured (Mather 178).

Mapping is another important tool for portrayal in both *Palestine* and *Footnotes*, but where *Palestine* follows the traditional route of using the locations as chapter divisions, *Footnotes*, apart from having the broad two sections on Khan Younish and Rafah, uses a magnifying effect to shift the reader’s focus from a position of viewing the situation from the top where the entire area looks like specks from the sky, to suddenly plunging us headlong into a ground level scene where we can see the action as if it were happening in front of us. The leading of the men into the school grounds contains some of the most poignant examples of this method (*Footnotes* 216-217). A complex emotional landscape is thus born and we are never allowed to slip into the comfort of indifference towards the subject. Sacco expertly exploits the form to humanize a conflict that we have hitherto largely apprehended through the media statistics of mortality or maps of geography.

“Events are continuous” (252), says a man in *Footnotes* and Sacco echoes this sentiment repeatedly, not just in the foreword to the book, but also in numerous interviews. The form and content in both of Sacco’s texts reinforce each other to underscore this belief; the images bleed out of the panels, history bleeds out of the past into the present, and Palestinians bleed in the service of both. In *Palestine* the movement from present to past is more choppy as we can see in the Chapter titled “The Bucket” (65) where the Palestinians are reciting the events of the night in one panel and the next panel is the depiction of the incident. However, as the story progresses, this skill of portraiture is honed owing to the broad time frame traversed by the narrative, and by the time we reach “The Fedayeen” in *Footnotes* the staging is almost cinematic. The Fedayeen, half in shadow, and smoking a cigarette, talks about the events of the past that are illustrated in the background and Sacco’s response is also paneled within the same scene. A dialectic between the past and present is instituted as the narrative is converted into an architectonic palimpsest of ‘telling’ with one level that of the past, the other of the present, the third of Sacco’s moment of creation and lastly the reader’s contemporaneity which sandwiches all into one jumbo bite.

...We enter the page, it seems, through the fighter’s body, but his present-day self also occupies the panel, sharing space. Past and present are here contiguous; the younger self has his hand on the shoulder of the older self (Chute 112).

Apart from stylistic and ideological similarities, one factor that binds both texts is the author-character of Sacco. His discomfort with being a journalist peddling the trauma of war is incorporated as a consistent subtext especially in *Palestine*. He paints an exaggerated persona for himself, ironically commenting on his supposedly shark-like pursuit of the “itsy-bitsy details, descriptions of the crunching sounds” (94). Before the reader can throw any punches at him, he confesses to caring only about that which will look good in his comic. Through this convoluted self-deprecating strategy he posits himself in sharp contrast to the Palestinians whom he is there to interview, ensuring that all notions of audience likeability are transferred to them through a slightly negative comparison with this seemingly uppity reporter. The exaggerated swagger of his world-weary personage is obvious, though in tune with the grotesque three-dimensionality of *Palestine*, but it does start feeling too put-on after a while. However, as Rebecca Scherr points out, *Palestine*’s aesthetic, where the panels are often framed as photographs in Sacco’s hand, manages to successfully complicate the ethics of ‘looking’ and consuming other people’s pain (31):

Pg. 32, then, is a moment when Sacco purposely takes on the imperial power of the seer, when the other's refusal is given representation anyway; the patient is transformed, against his will, into an object of the gaze... And we as readers, who have consented to align our "gazes" with Sacco's, must confront what this means for us, as we are inextricably pulled into this voyeuristic relationship whether we like it or not (Scherr 32).

Palestine is Sacco's first project and he arrives in the West Bank armed not only with his drawing tools but a whole host of prejudices about the Palestinian natives. Instances where these initial reservations bubble to the fore are shown within the narrative, explicitly highlighting how Sacco's preconceived notions exist but are kept aside to maintain fairness during his talks with Palestinians. The deliberate inclusion of these fulminations within the narrative, like when the woman with the Palestinian boyfriend turns him down and he mutters "Bitch! Terrorist Groupie!" (*Palestine* 7), help to map a developmental schema for his character, as he moves from this point of horrid instinctive stereotyping to understanding the enormity of Palestinian suffering. The Sacco-character at the end of this text would never use the word 'terrorist' for Palestinians again, and the Sacco-character that we meet in *Footnotes in Gaza* is even more righteously determined to establish the brutal truths of the screening operations in Khan Younis and Rafah, preventing 1956 from being reduced to just another historical footnote.

The apotheosis of this character arc are the haunting last pages of *Footnotes*; Sacco draws himself facing Abu Juhish as the old man stumbles over his words. There is a pause as Jushish says, "Fear fear," when Belal asks him what is the worst thing he remembers from that day. The image is striking as Jushish is drawn on the left facing Sacco, looking down while Sacco is on the right facing him. Darkness surrounds them and Sacco has a moment of clarity as shame floods his being "for losing something along the way as I collected my evidence, disentangled it, dissected it, indexed it, and logged it onto my chart" (*Footnotes* 364). This character who had turned a strong critical gaze onto himself for our benefit in *Palestine* demonstrates the rawest of emotions as his aesthetic chokes up from here on, sans page numbers, sans words, Sacco realizes his inability to ever truly be able to render the fear that the Palestinians experienced in the harrowing encounter at the school. The graphic novel ends one panel short, imperfect, and a large black page looms, a somber memorial.

In his interview with Hillary Chute, Sacco states that he feels that *Palestine* is overdone. In other interviews also he has mentioned the feeling that the drawing in it is rough and amateurish:

...My feeling is, only pull the rabbit out of your hat when you need to. When you look at *Palestine*, I'm pulling rabbits out of hats that shouldn't be there... A lot of the drawings I was doing were to amuse myself at the drawing table, so I wouldn't get bored. Over time...I realized you can only use these techniques when it's going to advance the story or heighten it. You squander that sort of thing when you do it all the time (*The Believer* 2011).

While there is some logic to rationing one’s techniques in the service of an agenda and not include every novelty into one narrative just for the sake of demonstrating one’s artistic merit, I am inclined to disagree with Sacco here for being too harsh on himself by judging the sketches through the convenience of retrospective vision.

Palestine is grotesque, the Crumb style of elongated figurations reaches out and grabs your attention and refuses to let go. Everything about *Palestine* is lopsided, bursting at the seams. The panels are angled, the drawing is rougher and bigger, features of the characters are exaggerated, the headings of the chapters ironically comment on the storytelling and are typographically merged with the action on the page. *Footnotes* is smoother, the paneling is straight, aligned. The headings, while are still ironic, don’t overhang, but rather occupy smaller portions and the typography is sedate. Where *Palestine* is suggestive of the violence, none is actually ever shown. It is all narrated, or the door is shut right before we get a look inside. It shows by not showing. *Footnotes*, on the other hand, is a blood fest in comparison. The graphic assault is interminable as the same scene is repeatedly re-remembered from five to six different viewpoints.

Palestine is aesthetically mesmerizing, and *Footnotes* is sleek and cinematic. One cannot deny that Sacco’s art has traversed a large terrain between 1992 and 2009. *Palestine* holds the reader’s attention as your eyes easily take in the artistic acrobatics of 270 odd pages of a glimpse into the Israel-Palestine conflict through the novel format of a comic. The numerous breaks also allow for breathing space to move in and out of the psychological graphing of pain. Sacco’s consistent commentary on his presence helps refract the emotionality engendered by the storyline. Affect is contained as the reader is saved from plunging into incoherence, aesthetically exorcised and made manifest through the excessive formal techniques. *Footnotes* is weary, Sacco is present in only a handful of the chapter beginnings and the commentaries on the task of the journalist are few and far between. The 370 pages are difficult to get through because there is nothing to hide behind. The art is subservient to the story; everything works to enhance the smell of death that tinges the air. The sufferers’ eyes hold us hostage in front of the wall not unlike the ones their loved ones were shot against. The impact bubbles, builds, and ultimately bursts in those final moments when we are made to relive the scene, one last time, from within the character, the chaos all around us as we run and that last harrowing image of the bat that swings towards our head before everything goes dark.

Palestine and *Footnotes* occupy two very different places on Sacco’s comics aesthetic and serve different functions which, when combined, result in a project that is arguably the most effective rendition of the historical conflict. In one of his interviews with Alex Burrows for *The Quietus*, Sacco talks about his conscious effort to not make the violence in his stories seem beautiful. This is an interesting demand from a comic artist whose work is intricate and eye-catching. If he meant only that he doesn’t wish to glorify violence, then his attempt is unquestionably successful, but it does make one wonder whether it is possible to artistically depict violence without making it visually appealing? A slight detour might help to fruitfully orient the discussion.

Kees, Burton, Andrews and Kozup, in their market study on graphic pictorial warnings on cigarette packaging inferred a positive correlation between graphic depictions and the

possibility of deterring consumers from smoking. They also determined that combining words with text on the packets increased the impact of the message on the consumers (266).

Although more graphic pictures are predicted to have favourable effects on intentions to quit smoking through the level of fear evoked, highly graphic pictures may have a negative impact on copy test variables, such as message recall and package attitude (Kees, Burton, Andrews and Kozup 268).

However, the concomitant possible result of putting off customers and reducing their recall of the message on the packet were also hinted at. Now their reference point is graphic pictures which are as close to ‘reality’ as photographs. It can be argued that by mediating the violent graphic through drawing wherein the violent ‘reality’ of the photographic image is aestheticized, but still retaining the potent combination of words and images, a positive variation of the aforementioned impact could be engendered. The aim of the graphic artist is not to be so graphic as to make the reader feel that they cannot read anymore but to encourage a continuance of the gaze so as to drive home the message of the narrative. By enacting a visual sleight the immediate selfish disgust at bodily violence created in the readers by the image is contained, combined with words, and then launched back at the readers to allow them to experience the greater violence inflicted on the bodies of others.

The curious power of amalgamating the touchability (both emotional and physical) of the comic mode with the disinterestedness of journalism is best epitomized by Tristram Walker’s reading of Sacco’s graphic style. Walker draws on Scott McCloud’s concept of “closure” to hypothesize the “wound”- like functioning of trauma as Sacco’s comics aesthetic (71):

McCloud uses “closure” to describe the process of gap filling that occurs when the mind completes pictures from limited information...McCloud suggests that by filling in those gaps between panels, the reader becomes complicit in the construction of narrative imagery...Sacco’s work requires the reader to mentally construct the reality of trauma...we are guided in deciding the degree of brutality between frames by the images and written narration provided by Sacco (Walker 69).

The inextricable combination of show and tell in graphic narratives creates a gross fascination to devour the product and yet retain the affective qualities of the story being told. Joe Sacco, in his masterful and variant portrayals of the Israel-Palestine conflict demonstrates the graphic artist’s proclivity for narratives of corporeality by utilizing the inherent tactility of comic book reading to weave a tale that “draw[s] us ever more powerfully *into* the larger world beyond our own small sense of self” (Scherr 34).

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