PALGRAVE STUDIES IN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

DOCUMENTARY COMICS

GRAPHIC TRUTH-TELLING IN A SKEPTICAL AGE

Nina Mickwitz

Documentary Comics

Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels

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Documentary Comics

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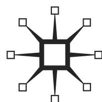

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Introduction

To read the comics of Joe Sacco, and those by Marjane Satrapi, offers considerably different experiences not least in terms of subject matter. Sacco's work depicts his travels in conflict ridden areas in the early 1990s Balkans and more recently the Middle East, while Marjane Satrapi's memoirs tell of growing up in Iran before, during, and after the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in the late 1970s, and of her teenage years in exile in Europe. The former thus relays a journey undertaken in a professional capacity and the latter traces the formation of a diasporic and transcultural subject position. Aesthetically, too, there are clear disparities. Sacco's style mostly adopts a realist tenor, at least by comics standards. At times, his line drawing exaggerates angles, uses foreshortening, and expressive characterization. But this is countered by naturalistic observation of detail, cross hatching to articulate shadow and form, and use of linear perspective. Satrapi's work, on the other hand, is highly stylized and selective. It frequently features a flattened picture plane and privileges shape and contrasting blocks of black and white over line as a means of figuration. However, such differing topics and their decidedly aesthetic qualities notwithstanding, it is possible to conceive of a significant link between these texts. This is the link that initially sparked my investigation, and that has prompted the themes articulated and tracks followed through the chapters of this book.

Each comic includes the representation of personal responses interwoven with accounts of specific socio-historical issues and contexts. Moreover, both Satrapi and Sacco engage the reader in narratives that are to be understood as having a particular relation to their topics. They are not, or at least claim not to be, fictions. Both texts adopt a register, or mode of address, that invites readers to decode and make sense of them as representations of real historical persons, events, and experiences. Such a reader position is also significantly constructed by, to use the terminology of Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean (1991), paratextual elements. These might be materially appended publisher's/editor's descriptions, quotes from reviews on the back cover, and often a substantial author statement or a foreword by somebody else,[1] but also reviews, listings, and advertising.

So how, then, might Sacco's and Satrapi's work be located in relation to each other? Terms such as "journalism," "reportage," and "autobiography" in effect create a distinction between these two examples, as by implication they become classified as belonging to separate categories. Yet it seems significant that, beyond being comics, they share the ambition to mediate actual events and the real world. The term "nonfiction" accounts somewhat better for the commonality between these texts. Even so, none of the above descriptions seem to sufficiently acknowledge the key significance of *visual* codes and mediating strategies that are immediate and integral to the readers' engagement with both Sacco's and Satrapi's narratives.

The grounds for this project thus emerge from the connection between nonfiction comics and the category of moving image documentary. Both are sequential narratives that combine iconic and symbolic systems of signification, and both cue readers/viewers to understand them as "of the actual world." And, as commonplace understandings of documentary tend to assume particular types of imaging technologies that would not necessarily be applicable to comics, this connection begs for closer examination. Nevertheless, and returning to the examples of Sacco's and Satrapi's work, it does seem that documentary might provide a useful primary description of the connection between them, one not invalidated by the fact that the former can also be thought of as reportage and the latter an autobiographical narration. Differences between audiovisual nonfiction texts can be just as comprehensive. For example, Simon Reeve's *Tropic of Capricorn* (BBC2, 2008) is a television series that traces a journey and offers a simultaneously local and global perspective, while commenting on environmental as well as socio-economic issues. It uses a presenter-led format, with an anchor whose authority and specialist knowledge does not preclude a personal tone of commentary. Reeve's presentation occasionally incorporates emotional responses as he mediates vicarious exposure to, and experiences of, new locations and situations. Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), on the other hand, is a film that through an assemblage of home-movie footage and autobiographical memory-work interrogates identity, family relations, and mental health issues. A highly personal and intimate account, it quite clearly at the same time holds broader social resonances. As with the comics of Sacco and Satrapi, *Tropic of Capricorn* combines journalistic reportage with personally inflected commentary, and *Tarnation* presents an autobiographical and retrospective reconstruction of childhood experiences through which broader social and societal concerns are raised. Yet this does not prevent both of these audiovisual texts being listed as documentaries.

As systems of communication that offer highly visual narratives, professing to represent referents of historical actuality, documentary

and certain comics appear to have something in common. There are, of course, undeniable medium-specific differences between comics and the kinds of media texts typically talked of as documentaries. But the challenges, conditions, and strategies (and their implications) involved with visually representing and narrating the actual historical world can be identified as shared and central concerns. Considering examples from a cluster of late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century comics, this book asks the question: Might these comics be thought of in terms of documentary? And if this is so, how do comics contribute to the documentary project?

The Context of Comics Scholarship

My purpose in talking about documentary comics is not to extend an argument about the legitimacy of comics as a cultural form, drawing on the relatively established and respected position of documentary. Nor is my argument about the capacity of comics to address a multiplicity of subjects, adopting a variety of different registers. It is of course the case that academic interest in particular cultural phenomena and forms, especially those that have previously been dismissed and ignored, in itself might work as a mechanism of validation. After all, however much there are academics reluctant to consider themselves as contributors to extant hierarchies, and those whose work actively engages in challenging such values and structures, the academe is intrinsically and institutionally implicated in such hierarchies. Even so, it is comics' producers who, first and foremost, assert the form's capacity for diverse subject matter and approaches. The project of establishing comics as a legitimate and coherent area of scholarship, however, is a different matter, and one currently being undertaken by a growing academic community across a broad range of disciplines and institutional contexts. It is within this context, and in view of the prominent role of literature and language studies within this burgeoning field, that I argue for the connection between comics representing actual persons, experiences, and events and documentary as a valuable and alternative framework for analysis. Categorizing these texts according to literary paradigms—journalism, autobiography, biography, and so on—undercuts connections and obscures relationships that have the potential to enrich our understanding of both comics and other cultural expressions.

Calls for recognition of comics have recurrently been made in conjunction with claims for the literary credentials of specific comics (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; Versaci, 2007; Williams, 2010) and thus the capacity of the form to qualify in terms of literary merit. This tendency has not been without its critics. Shortly after the publication of Charles Hatfield's (2005)

Alternative Comics—An Emerging Literature, he and Bart Beaty conducted a rolling debate in *The Comics Reporter* expressly dealing with such questions. Beaty queried the claim made for comics as literature made in the book's title, questioning the need to lay claim to cultural validity by reference to literature and arguing that comics are a narrative form belonging more squarely in visual culture than in a literary world. Hatfield's response suggests that rather than absorbing comics into literary canons, attention to comics potentially contributes to a broader and less exclusive understanding of literature. On the other hand, Hatfield's positioning of comics as literature aimed to challenge to the idea of comics as intrinsically simple and universally accessible. The idea that literature signifies challenging, complex, and therefore worthwhile material in turn draws on certain ideas of what constitutes culture. But Beaty's advocacy for the visual culture paradigm equally invokes culturally privileged and sanctioned spaces, such as museums and galleries, in keeping with a similar normative bias. Beaty and Hatfield ultimately converge in a shared focus on formal characteristics and struggle over cultural value. The question of comics belonging in a visual or literary paradigm (reflecting their respective disciplinary and institutional contexts) seems to fade into greater ease of agreement over the primacy of narrative and the important role of visual characteristics. Aaron Meskin's (2009) detailed discussion of the pros and cons of thinking about comics as literature concludes that comics are best conceived of as a hybrid form. But I am not wholly convinced that the answer, or even the question, concerns the ontology of comics: what comics are or are not.

Debates about the form's own synthesis of codes and conventions are complicated further by the positioning of comics studies, and insecurities about comics in terms of their historically marginalized position are mirrored by the uncertain territory scholarship and research on comics occupy. Despite much celebration of the multidisciplinary character of this emerging field, (Hatfield, 2010; Venezia, 2011) the comics-as-literature question is partly about where comics research "belongs" as a subject area in the (shrinking) liberal arts academy. Supported by the connection in material form between graphic novels and books, and their increasingly shared marketing and distribution networks, has given rise to a notable and influential association between comics and literature. Beyond journals attending specifically to comics and graphic narrative,[2] articles on comics appearing in journals such as *PMLA* (Modern Languages Association of America), *Modern Fiction Studies*, *College Literature*, and *Prose Studies* significantly outnumber articles published in other fields. For example, special issues on graphic narrative have been published by *Melus* (volume 32, issue 3, fall 2007), *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* (volume 52, issue 4, winter 2006), *College Literature* (volume 38, issue 3, July 1, 2011) and *SubStance* (volume 40, issue

124, number 1, 2011) compared with a section dedicated to comics study in *Cinema Journal* (volume 50, issue 3, 2011). The recently announced first Graphic Novel competition in the United Kingdom (January 2012) is jointly organized by *Myriad* publishers and the English department at Sussex University, and the winning entries for the *Cape/Observer* Graphic Short Story Prize were exhibited at Foyles bookstore in London. In a similar vein, the first British Master's degree specifically devoted to comics is offered within the English department at the University of Dundee, while the University of Florida's graduate track in Comics and Visual Rhetoric is run by its English department.

In other words, the interest in and incorporation of comics into research and curriculum has been most apparent in disciplines traditionally associated with literature, including Modern Languages, American Studies, French departments, and so on. This may partly be due to an increasingly integrated approach that incorporates visual culture (film, photography, and architecture provide further examples) as a subject of interest within such departments. There is no convincing evidence to suggest that work on comics in these contexts neglect or fail to take into account the visual aspects of comics. The implications, however, of comics being studied within a certain tradition, with particular methodological preferences and models, frames of reference, and terminology are significant.

Although reluctant to get embroiled in defining characteristics, it seems useful to offer a brief detour at this point for reasons that I hope will become clear. Whether word and image relations or sequentiality take precedence as defining features of comics has proven to be something of a bone of contention among scholars in the field. These debates can be broadly understood as divided into two positions, one that sees the combination of word and image as a crucial defining feature (Harvey, 1994, 9), the other privileging sequence as an essential element (McCloud, 1993, 9). Strictly adhered to, the former would exclude wordless comics (Beronä, 2001, 19–39; Kunzle, 1990, 194) and abstract comics (Baetens, 2011*a*; Molotiu, 2009), while the latter fails to account for the possibility of single-panel comics narrative (Beaty, 1999, 68).[3] I tend toward Karin Kukkonen's (2011, 35) somewhat broader and more inclusive definition of comics as multimodal[4] texts, often (but not always) using a combination of words, images, and panel arrangements in order to communicate. The fundamental and vital role of images in comics is, however, not in any doubt. Indeed, comics without images are difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of. Yet, even if it is possible to find examples of comics devoid of pictorial content, the visual arrangement of their text in and as "lexias" (Kannenberg, 2001, 309), a lexia being "a block of text which is designed to be read/viewed as a single unit" (ibid), remains vital to conceptualizing them as comics.

Thinking about comics as a hybrid narrative form, utilizing visual (both spatial and figurative) and verbal codes of signification, does not inherently diminish them. Yet becoming subsumed in a manner that fails to acknowledge difference, be this context-related or formal, would function to further marginalize a cultural form that historically has been routinely dismissed. Thierry Groensteen's (2007) seminal formalist framework set out to preclude and deter highhanded applications of either literary or moving image, analytical tools to comics. Especially cinematic frameworks have been viewed with suspicion among comics scholars. Considering the ease with which (ill-informed) comparisons between comics and storyboarding might be drawn, this is no surprise. In response to the, still unabated, glut of big screen adaptations of comic books, Pascal Lefèvre (2007) has also elaborated on the profound differences and ontological distinctions between film and comics. However, as comics studies gain confidence and maturity (if not necessarily institutional legitimacy), this both allows for and demands a less defensively exceptionalist stance. Comics offer a multitude of connections and shared characteristics with other forms, from cross-media characters and genres to iterations of seriality. Beyond attention to convergence and adaptation, it seems that correspondences and intersections with moving image forms, especially television, still leave much to be explored.

Comics and Documentary

When it comes to nonfiction comics, formal specificity has not prevented comparative analysis and reading, although certain recurring categorizations—autobiography, biography, journalism, and so on—are notable. I am not necessarily arguing for the supremacy of one interconnection over another. But, by bringing comics into dialogue with writing on documentary, this book aims to offer and explore a different framework to bear, and to hopefully make visible and available connections that have hitherto received limited attention.

John Corner's (2007, 11) point that "[t]he mutual relation between literal and figurative levels at work in images and sequences, is [. . .] a continuing point of focus in scholarship on film and television documentary" suggests a potential for productive dialogue between these two fields. I hope to demonstrate that the comics I analyze, and others like them, share an investment and engagement in negotiating an exploring the relationship between reality and representation as a social, visual, and narrative practice. This is not the first work to note the relationship between certain comics and the category of documentary. Jeff Adams (2008) has argued for

documentary comics in relation to the politics of representation historically embedded in social realism, Benjamin Woo (2010) has suggested that Joe Sacco's work has more in common with documentary than journalism, and Lefèvre (2011) has applied Bill Nichols' (1991) typology of modes of documentary to comics. This book to some extent builds on ideas raised by these contributions. My aim, however, is to subject the notion of documentary comics to a more sustained examination than has been offered so far, and to also acknowledge that talking about documentary comics raises certain questions in terms of documentary as a category and field of study.

The book outlines an understanding of documentary as visual (but not exclusively so), narrative, and performative representation, and a mode of address through which audiences and readers are invited to accept that the persons, events, and encounters signified are actual rather than imagined. Examining a number of comics in chapters constructed around concerns that I consider to be centrally important, if not necessarily defining or constitutive of the category of documentary, I argue that these texts offer readers a position equivalent to that of documentary audiences. My analyses will demonstrate how the visual and narrative strategies of comics extend their own, somewhat different possibilities to those of more conventionally accepted documentary means of representation, while at the same time a continuation of documentary motivations and narrative tropes can be discerned. In effect, I propose that these comics remediate (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55–56) a documentary mode of address usually associated with certain other media. Despite a discernible reluctance to ascribe to essentialist conceptions of documentary "truth" as attached to particular technologies, a significant slice of documentary studies still works on the assumption that documentary is specific to particular media forms. This project's mapping of a cross-media connection consequently prompts a review of the perceived medium specificity of documentary.

Scope and Boundaries

As in film and broadcast documentary, the representation of the real world in comics encompasses diverse approaches. Some portray historical events as narrated and brought to life by a cast of fictional characters. The following examples, although far from a comprehensive survey, demonstrate the plurality and variance of comics addressing the real and point toward multiple and diverse geographical, historical, and cultural contexts of comics.

One of the key figures of the American underground tradition and cofounder of Rip-Off Press, Jack Jackson (also known as Jaxon), wrote comics about the bloody suppression of Native American peoples in *Comanche*

Moon (1979), and the territorial border wars between the United States and Mexico during the nineteenth century in *Los Tejanos* (1982). Jason Lutes (2008, 2009) has similarly charted events in Berlin during the Weimar republic and the subsequent rise of fascism and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) tells of the state of emergency in 1970s India. Calling attention to salient contemporary issues, Ville Tietäväinen's *Näkymättmömät Kädet/ Invisible Hands* (2011) portrayal of the hardships and exploitation faced by North African immigrants in Spain is based on field research, while the anonymously produced *Zahra's Paradise* tells of life in the current Islamic republic of Iran. Both of these comics, although grounded in actual experiences, ostensibly make use of composite protagonists and plotlines in order to construct their narratives. Further removed from potential comparisons with historical or documentary drama, one might consider Woodrow Phoenix's *Rumble Strip* (2008), a comics-polemic about the lethal potential of cars and the adaptation of the 9/11 report into comics form (Jacobson and Colón, 2006). The Czech trilogy O Přibjehi/*Stories* (2010) by cultural anthropologist Markéta Hajská, Romany linguist Máša Bořkovcová, and scriptwriter/artist Vojtěch Mašek has been described by José Alaniz (2012) in terms of comics ethnography, while Paul Davies' book *Us and Them: What Do the Americans Think of the British? What Do the British Think of the Americans?* (2004) combines words and drawing with a talking head vox pop structure. Meanwhile, creative partners Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio have produced comics based on oral history and local community projects, for example *The Bradford One Hundred* (1997) and *The Invisible City*: *stories by people who work at night* (1999).

Aside from the internationally acclaimed account of the Hiroshima bombings by Keiji Nakazawa, *Hadashi No Gen/Barefoot Gen* (which originally appeared in various magazines from 1973–1984), adult manga with pedagogical aims and factual content have from the 1980s included themes linked to politics, economics, and history. Some of these comics have become known as "documentary manga" (Kinsella, 2000, 79). The topic of historical events also have a long and well-established tradition in Anglophone comics, from the E. C. (Educational Comics) comics, and *Classics Illustrated* (Witek, 1989, 15) to the 2008 comics adaptation of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire* (first published in 1980). Educational factual comics have been published in series such as the *Introducing* . . . graphic guides to a broad range of thinkers and topics covering numerous disciplines by Icon Books and various cartoon histories and guides by Larry Gonick.

Readers might query the absence of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003) in subsequent chapters. Taking into account that this comic has received considerable critical attention, and to acknowledge its canonical status, the

approach to primary examples for this contribution might be described as post-*Maus*. I have also limited the scope of this project to comics that profess not to employ fictional characters as a device for narrating and depicting the real. Signaling that I privilege the notion of *encounter* in my understanding of documentary, they exclude comics biographies and historical narratives that exclusively draw on secondary source materials. The examples I draw on, then, are all based on first-hand engagement with either the situations depicted or the persons whose witness accounts inform the narrative. That my chosen examples potentially qualify under more than one chapter heading reflects that most of the chapters deal with different aspects of documentary. The concerns they raise are unlikely to be mutually exclusive.

Although my selection is not based on national origin, as such considerations are of secondary interest for the purposes at hand, the particular cultural and geographical position from which I have made it will undeniably be evident. While some of the comics have emerged from the Francophone comics or bandes dessinée publishing culture, the texts engaged with here have all been published in English and marketed to a broadly Anglophone, western public. Likewise, references to both film and television documentary through examples and literature are likely to be heavily weighted in terms of a British context.

Overview of Chapters

The first chapter sets out the premise of the book's intervention, arguing that those comics that take the actual and historical real as their subject and documentary (more commonly assumed to be identified by its use of recording technologies) share an ambition to narrate and visually represent real people, events, and experiences, and consequently offer their readers and audiences comparable positions.

The second chapter probes the interwoven discourses of realism, authenticity, and objectivity at play within the documentary image. As mentioned earlier, despite acknowledgement that documentary involves construction rather than transparent duplication of the reality it records, the tacit assumption that documentary is defined by its use of recording media persists. The drawn, hand-rendered visual mediation in comics thus presents a particular problem. Responding to this issue, the chapter outlines discourses of realism and authenticity in relation to recorded and hand-rendered images, respectively. The textual analysis of this chapter considers selected segments from Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor: Ordinary Life Is Pretty Complex Stuff* (2004). This analysis addresses the representation of sound, before outlining how *American Splendor* critically undermines

the perceived conflation of the real and its representation that marks documentary realism. I argue that this comic illustrates and highlights a crucial element of comics' contribution to documentary discourse. Attention to Emmanuel Guibert's *The Photographer* (2009) will expand the consideration of differences between drawing and photography and offer opportunity to think through challenges of representing duration in comics.

Chapter 3 considers how comics as documentary might work in relation to the archive and collective memory. Documentaries seeking to engage with events in living memory, in order to simultaneously tell, show, and preserve witness accounts, contextualize and narrate at the point of documentation. In other words, documentary that draws on encounter and testimony, whether in comics or other forms, performs a dual function. Close reading of examples, Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) and Emmanuel Guibert's *Alan's War* (2008), examines how counter narratives to particular versions of the historical past, as constituted by witness accounts, are constructed and simultaneously documented using means and strategies particular to the comics form.

In examining the travel narrative in contemporary long-form comics, Chapter 4 seeks to think through the role of cultural narrative in the telling, showing, and performing of the world around us, and how documentary encounter and performance can function to reproduce a dominant cultural narrative. Travel narratives in a contemporary comics invite attention, especially in view of their discursive connection with earlier counterparts; combining educative and entertainment purposes, the travelogue has been a popular documentary genre since the days of lantern slide shows and early moving-image documentary. The chapter examines Craig Thompson's *Carnet de Voyage* (2004) and Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2005) and *Shenzen: A Travelogue in China* (2006). I then go on to address Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the Story of a Return* (2008) as an example that extends the notion of travel beyond the generic conventions of travel documentary.

Chapter 5 highlights the complex relations between visibility and voice, but dealing with these aspects in turn. The issue of representation as visibility has been a core problematic for documentary's ambitions to effect reform, civic engagement, and social responsibility, what I choose to call "the documentary of social concern." Josh Neufeld's *AD New Orleans: After the Deluge* (2009) suggests that the opaqueness of cartoon representations can be utilized to "screen" subjects from the asymmetrical power relations caused by an intrusive spectatorial gaze. But even when documentary texts make deliberate effort to represent their subjects' positions as valid, more often than not the subjects' control in the construction of such systems of communication remains limited. Hence, Chapter 5 goes on to