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Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative

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COMICS—A FORM ONCE CONSIDERED PURE JUNK—IS SPARKING INTEREST IN LITERARY STUDIES. I'M AS AMAZED AS ANYBODY ELSE BY THE

comics boom—despite the fact that I wrote an English department dissertation that makes the passionate case that we should not ignore this innovative narrative form. Yet if there's promoting of comics, there's also confusion about categories and terms. Those of us in literary studies may think the moves obvious: making claims in the name of popular culture or in the rich tradition of word-and-image inquiry (bringing us back to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages). But comics presents problems we're still figuring out (the term doesn't settle comfortably into our grammar; nomenclature remains tricky and open to debate). The field hasn't yet grasped its object or properly posed its project. To explore today's comics we need to go beyond preestablished rubrics: we have to reexamine the categories of fiction, narrative, and historicity. Scholarship on comics—and specifically on what I will call graphic narrative—is gaining traction in the humanities. Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. Throughout this essay, I treat comics as a medium—not as a lowbrow genre, which is how it is usually understood. However, I will end by focusing attention on the strongest genre in the field: nonfiction comics.

I'm particularly interested in how comics considers the problem of representing history because my own work has centered on what the comics form makes possible for nonfiction narrative, especially

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on the ability of comics to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page. Further, I'm interested in how comics expands modes of historical and personal expression while existing in the field of the popular.¹ How does contemporary comics approach devastating public histories? Why do female artists blur the distinction between "private" and "public" histories? The aesthetics and narrative impact of comics that address history are a large focus of *MetaMaus*, a book by Art Spiegelman about the thirteen-year process of making his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which I am helping to edit.

Overview

Three journals have devoted special issues to graphic narrative. Art Spiegelman recently taught a seminar at Columbia University called Comics: Marching into the Canon. *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction* includes comics. Outside the academy, graphic narrative is coming to the forefront of literary-critical and cultural conversations: *Time* magazine, a mainstream barometer, named Alison Bechdel's graphic narrative memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* its best book of 2006—the same year Houghton Mifflin, which publishes the Best American series, inaugurated the first Best American Comics volume. The *New York Times Magazine*, in a cover article in July 2004, asserted that this "new literary form" is "what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal" (McGrath 24).

Graphic novel is a much more common and recognizable term than *graphic narrative*.² *Graphic novel*—which took shape as a marketing term—has a specific history in the second half of the twentieth century. Part of the impetus came from a vital underground publishing community that wanted works with greater impact in the medium of comics: the first public use of the phrase, by Richard Kyle, was

in a 1964 newsletter circulated to members of the Amateur Press Association, and the term was subsequently borrowed by Bill Spicer in his fanzine *Graphic Story World*. Many think Will Eisner invented the term because he used it in a more commercial context, to sell *A Contract with God* (1978) to publishers. A series of four serious, linked vignettes chronicling the sordid circumstances and assimilationist desires of immigrants in a Bronx tenement in the 1930s, *A Contract with God* was the first book marketed as a "graphic novel."³

Decades later, we find "graphic novel" sections in many bookstores. Yet *graphic novel* is often a misnomer. Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella—including Spiegelman's World War II-focused *Maus*, which helped rocket the term into public consciousness—aren't novels at all: they are rich works of nonfiction; hence my emphasis here on the broader term *narrative*. (Indeed, the form confronts the default assumption that drawing as a system is inherently more fictional than prose and gives a new cast to what we consider fiction and nonfiction.) In *graphic narrative*, the substantial length implied by *novel* remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction. A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics.⁴

There are many formats for comics, which all carry unique cultural baggage. The comic strip, which emerged in the United States before the twentieth century, ranges from less than one page to several pages or more. This is a comics segment that can be a minimal unit or what we might think of as a short story. The comic book, which emerged in the 1930s, is typically thirty-two pages long and either is a collection of comic-strip stories or is made up of one sustained story, often an installment in a series (see Lefèvre).⁵ (Comics inhabits all kinds of serial forms and contexts, from weekly or daily strips to monthly comic books to serial characters represented across formats; I argue elsewhere that the comics

page itself is a material register of seriality, a narrative architecture built on the establishment of or deviation from regular intervals of space.) As a form, comics differs from the cartoon, since cartoons are single-panel images. While both forms often involve a similar visual-verbal punch, comics, usually unfolding over multiple frames, carries a different narrative push than a cartoon does. Yet comics authors are still routinely called cartoonists; in fact, the historical definition of *cartoon* continues to resonate with authors who embrace the mass reproduction of comics—the aspect of the form that keeps comics from being considered “fine art.” *Cartoon* comes from the Italian word *cartone*, meaning cardboard, and denotes a drawing for a picture or design intended historically to be transferred to tapestries or to frescoes (see Harrison; Janson; Harvey, “Comedy” and “Describing”). Yet, as Randall Harrison points out, “with the coming of the printing press, ‘cartoon’ took on another meaning. It was a sketch which could be mass produced. It was an image which could be transmitted widely” (16).⁶

But what *is* the comics form—its properties, purviews, abilities? Even comics aficionados might say, as Justice Potter Stewart did of pornography, that one simply knows it when one sees it. Comics is a creative and expansive form that has always been constrained—unlike, say, the artist’s book, which has a parallel history in the twentieth century—by formats dictated by commercial enterprise.⁷ The question of what Scott McCloud calls “functional descriptions” fuels an area of comics criticism,⁸ which is almost gleefully free of institutionally entrenched definitions. McCloud’s 1993 *Understanding Comics*, the first book to theorize comics in the medium of comics, suggests a deliberately broad—and provisional—definition. His analysis of the form includes but is not limited to the print context, which many practitioners and critics understand to be essential (e.g., Kunzle, *Early Comic Strip*; Dowd and Reinert).

McCloud defines comics as: “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (*Understanding* 9). (“Before it’s projected,” McCloud notes, “film is just a very very very very slow comic”[8].) The weight placed on sequence here allows McCloud to track a prehistory including pre-Columbian picture manuscripts, the Bayeux tapestry, and “The Tortures of St. Erasmus” (1460), among other seemingly unlikely cultural antecedents. Writing in 2001, Robert Harvey disagrees with McCloud’s notion that comics do not have to contain words (see also Smolderen, who rejects sequence as the defining property of comics and analyzes the “swarming effect” in single images from illustrated Bibles and Bosch and Brueghel up through children’s books). Harvey counters, “It seems to me that the essential characteristic of ‘comics’—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content. . . . And the history of cartooning—of ‘comics’—seems to me more supportive of my contention than of his” (“Comedy” 75–76). Harvey’s history starts in the eighteenth century and is located in figures including Hogarth, Gillray, Rowlandson, and Goya (see also Katz; Sabin).

McCloud’s and Harvey’s positions are not so contradictory. The form of comics always hinges on the way temporality can be traced in complex, often nonlinear paths across the space of the page; largely this registers in both words and images, although it doesn’t always have to. As Spiegelman suggests, comics works “choreograph and shape time” (“Ephemera” 4). And while many forms do and have done this, it is in the specificity of how this is accomplished that we can locate what is often most formally interesting about comics. Panels—which McCloud calls “comics’ most important icon” and which are a “general indicator that time or space is being divided”—are the most basic aspect of comics grammar, because, as

McCloud writes, “[c]omics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments”; they alternate on the page with blank space (*Understanding* 98, 99, 67). A comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn’t drawn as by what is: it is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments. McCloud alleges that the empty space, called the gutter, “plays host” to what is “at the very heart of comics” and that “what’s between the panels is the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium” (66; “Scott McCloud” 13).

Among these learned scholars and critics, a history of comics is being assembled as a way of carving out a tradition, in a rich history of forms, that leads to a contemporary excitement about graphic narrative. The following abbreviated history points to several key figures and events (here I offer a context for American work but do not emphasize the development of the commercial comic-book industry, which is dominated by two superhero-focused publishers, Marvel and DC). Even while McCloud and Harvey are at odds, they affirm Hogarth’s importance to comics (*Understanding* 16; “Comedy” 77). As I and Marianne DeKoven write in *Modern Fiction Studies*, for works such as *A Harlot’s Progress*—which, like comics, represents punctual, framed moments in an ongoing narrative—“[w]e may understand Hogarth’s influence by reading his work as extending *ut pictura poesis* from poetry to the modern genre of the novel: he introduced a sequential, novelistic structure to a pictorial form” (769). Later, in the nineteenth century, when a Swiss schoolmaster who is considered the inventor of modern comics, Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846), established comics conventions—he created what he called a “pictorial language,” an abbreviated style hinging on the appearance of panel borders on the page—he described his work as drawing on two forms: the novel and the “picture-stories” of Hogarth

(Kunzle, *Nineteenth Century and Father*; Willems). In 1832, extolling Töpffer’s work, Goethe praised the mass-culture potential of what had come to be called “picture-novels.”⁹

Even in this early incarnation, comics was understood as an antielitist art form. Yet American comic strips are set apart from the earlier European form—which was never a mass-market product in the same way—by their use of continuing characters and their appearance in mass-circulated newspapers (see Gordon). It is commonly accepted that in America comics were invented in 1895 for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* (the same year the Lumière brothers invented narrative film in Paris) with Richard Fenton Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid*, which focused on contemporary urban immigrants and featured an endearing, obnoxious child resident of an East Side tenement.¹⁰ Pulitzer realized that the strip was a circulation booster; the struggle that ensued in the sensational press between William Randolph Hearst and Pulitzer over *The Yellow Kid* reportedly gave birth to the term *yellow journalism*, after the Kid and his recognizable yellow gown.

Unlike modernist fiction that developed around the same time, the medium of comics was marked from the beginning by its commodity status. However, it is still largely unrecognized that the comics in the first decades of the twentieth century was both a mass-market product and one that influenced and was influenced by avant-garde practices, especially those of Dada and surrealism (Gopnik and Varnedoe; Inge). It is also little known that in the late 1930s, while comic books began their ascent on the back of *Superman*, the first modern graphic narratives, called “wordless novels,” had already appeared: beautifully rendered woodcut works—in some cases marketed as conventional novels—that almost entirely served a socialist agenda and that incorporated experimental practices widely associated with literary modernism (Joseph). Although called wordless novels, these works often did incorporate text, but not as captions

or as speech balloons (Beronä; see also Cohen). While they have not always been analyzed as part of the history of comics, including them in the development of graphic narrative, as some have begun to do, allows scholars to demonstrate how graphic narrative early in its modern history combined formal experimentation with an appeal to mass readerships—a development crucial to the impact of the form today.¹¹ In showing the tensions between mass printing and artisanal practice and between convention and experimentation, these works show the way early versions of graphic narrative responded to contemporary culture and anticipated the elaboration of genres and the mixture of high and low modes we recognize in present-day fiction.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, comics reflected the seismic cultural shifts—often produced by war—in American culture of those decades; comics bridged the experimentalism of literary and visual modernisms and mass-produced American popular culture. Founded by the cartoonist Harvey Kurtzman in 1952, *Mad Comics: Humor in a Jugular Vein* (later *MAD* magazine) was a rigorously self-reflexive comic book deeply concerned with comics aesthetics. With *Mad*, Kurtzman established the project of comics as a critique of mainstream America, particularly the media; as such, *Mad* was an inspiration for underground comics (often termed *comix*) in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Like the fiction of the 1960s, comics during that period was dominated by oppositionality. The full avant-gardism of comics arrived with the “underground comix revolution” in the latter years of the decade, a movement that explicitly termed itself avant-garde. Underground comics, a reaction to the censorious content code that debilitated the mainstream industry, were an influential cultural vehicle, challenging and arresting because they meditated on the violation of taboos. Rejecting mainstream publication outlets, the denizens of the underground comics

scene self-published work that—without commercial strictures—experimented with the formal capacities of comics. Out of this culture, today’s most enduring graphic narratives took shape—serious, imaginative works that explored social and political realities by stretching the boundaries of a historically mass medium. (Autobiography, arguably the dominant mode of current graphic narrative, was first established in the underground.)

Spiegelman provides a prominent example. His experimental underground comics stories and his autobiographical pieces, including the prototype “*Maus*,” as well as his two magazines, *Arcade* (1975–76) and *RAW* (1980–91), translate and transvalue an anti-narrative avant-garde aesthetic for the popular and populist medium of comics. Initially Spiegelman toys with narrative expectations of temporal movement, working in opposition to “diversionary” mainstream comics. In the later *RAW*, where *Maus* was first published serially, he expands this practice. We see that as historical enunciation weaves jaggedly through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities, comics—as a form that relies on space to represent time—becomes structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing.

Maus, which won a “special” Pulitzer Prize and introduced the sophistication of comics to the academy, portrays Jews as mice and Germans as cats. It tells the story of a cartoonist named Art Spiegelman and his father, Vladek Spiegelman, a Holocaust survivor, by moving back and forth between World War II-era Poland and New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. *Maus* has been written about widely.¹² It is an absorbing story, a moving portrait of a flawed family. It is also complex aesthetically and politically in ways specific to comics. Marianne Hirsch points out aspects of Spiegelman’s text that are widely applicable to the work the graphic narrative form can do. Spiegelman’s use of photographs in his hand-drawn text, she argues,

raises not only the question of how, forty years after Adorno's dictum, the Holocaust can be represented, but also how different media—comics, photographs, narrative, testimony—can interact with each other to produce a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of Holocaust representation and definitively eradicate any clear-cut distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic. ("Family Pictures" 11)

Spiegelman publicly and successfully fought the *New York Times* to get his book moved from the fiction to the nonfiction best-seller list. In competing or nonsynchronous narrative layers of comics, he creates an intense level of self-reflexivity (seen in fig. 1). In the graphic narrative, additionally, the non-transparency of drawing—the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text—lends a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comics pages that further enables comics works to be productively self-aware in how they "materialize" history (the striking verb is Spiegelman's [Brown 98]). Discussing *Maus's* place in the academy in a 2003 interview, Hirsch noted, "As for *Maus* and its acceptance in academia . . . it's more than acceptance. Everyone is rushing to write about *Maus*" ("Marianne Hirsch").

Contexts

The study of one touchstone text, *Maus*, is developing into an area that investigates the potential of the form at large. In his comment that "the stylistic surface [of the page] was a problem to solve" in *Maus*, Spiegelman aptly characterizes the graphic-narrative approach to style and form: articulating stories through the spatial aesthetics that the panels, grids, gutters, and tiers of comics offer (*Complete Maus*). Graphic narrative thus focuses attention on what W. J. T. Mitchell identifies as a refigured political formalism, a "new kind of formalism" that is in front of us now that the

"modernist moment of form . . . may be behind us" (324).¹³ In particular, graphic narrative offers compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods, and modes to consider the problem of historical representation. An awareness of the limits of representation—which not only is specific to the problem of articulating trauma but also has become a "*conditio sine qua non* of all representations" (Kunow 252)—is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement.

Some of the most riveting books out there—the ones waking up literary critics—represent often vicious historical realities. (Historians have been interested too—one of the best essays on *Maus* is in *Oral History Review*—but these visual-verbal texts are particularly relevant to literary scholars because of the way they represent history through narrative.) For instance, three of today's most acclaimed cartoonists, Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Marjane Satrapi, work in the nonfiction mode: Spiegelman on World War II and 9/11, Sacco on Palestine and Bosnia, Satrapi on Iran's Islamic Revolution and war with Iraq. This is not a coincidence. We may think of graphic narrative, in the innate, necessary formalism of its narrative procedure—in its experimentation with the artificial strictures of the comics form—as calling our attention to what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub call "textualization of the context": "the empirical content needs not just to be *known*, but to be *read*. . . . The basic and legitimate demand for *contextualization of the text* itself needs to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of *textualization of the context*" (xv). Graphic narrative accomplishes this work with its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation. In



FIG. 1

Page 41 from Spiegelman's *Maus II*. Used by permission of Art Spiegelman and the Wylie Agency.

Maus, for example, the context of the text—its position as Holocaust cultural production deliberately abdicating aesthetic mastery—is inscribed extrasemantically in the look of its shaggy lines: we register this rejection of Nazi tropes of mastery in how we read the text, in our perception of its lines' grainy texture.

The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories.¹⁴ Authors like Spiegelman and Sacco, engaged with the horizon of history, portray torture and massacre in a complex formal mode that does not turn away from or mitigate trauma; in fact, they demonstrate how its visual re-tracing is enabling, ethical, and productive. There is also a rich range of work by women writers who investigate childhood and the body—concerns typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private sphere. Satrapi's account of her youth in Iran, *Persepolis*, along with work by American authors like Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, exemplifies how graphic narrative can envision an everyday reality of women's lives, which, while rooted in the personal, is invested and threaded with collectivity, beyond prescriptive models of alterity or sexual difference. In every case, from the large-scale to the local, graphic narrative presents a traumatic side of history, but all these authors refuse to show it through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice.

The excitement surrounding nonfiction here is not meant to suggest that powerful work isn't being done with fiction. Authors such as Charles Burns (*Black Hole*), Daniel Clowes (*Ghost World*), and Chris Ware (*Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*) have raised the profile of literary comics with stories that are serious in scope and heavy on style. But I would suggest that the compounding of word and image has led to new

possibilities for writing history that combine formal experimentation with an appeal to mass readerships. Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention; the problematics of what we consider fact and fiction are made apparent by the role of drawing. Comics is a structurally layered and doubled medium that can proliferate historical moments on the page (as we see in Spiegelman's panel shown in fig. 1, in which concentration-camp corpses wordlessly invade a present-day SoHo studio).

To introduce some of today's promising work, I'll briefly return to Mitchell, whose example of how the horizons of form and politics intertwine is relevant to nonfiction graphic narrative. Mitchell considers Edward Said's cross-discursive, word-and-image text *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, a collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr, and emphasizes its focus on "spatial aesthetics" (324). In the book's introduction, Said writes, "I believe that essentially unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us. . . . Double vision informs my text" (6).

Published in 1986, the same year as the terrain-shifting *Maus*, Said's call for generic, disciplinary, and media crossing offers one explanation for his enthusiasm for comics, which he details in the admiring introduction to Sacco's 2001 graphic narrative *Palestine*, an example of what has been called "comics journalism." Comics contain "double vision" in their structural hybridity, their double (but nonsynthesized) narratives of words and images. In one frame of comics, the images and the words may mean differently, and thus the work sends out double-coded narratives or semantics.

Sacco's work, in its detailed density, calls attention to pace—a formal aspect that Said suggests "is perhaps the greatest of [Sacco's] achievements" ("Homage" v). Praising *Palestine*, Naseer Aruri even writes that "each page is equivalent to an essay"—an appraisal of density that is not restricted to the text's prose

but rather indicates how the thickness of the verbal-visual form in Sacco's hands transmits what can feel like surplus information or plenitude (qtd. in Sacco, *Palestine*, back cover). Few graphic narrative texts resist easy consumption more effectively than Sacco's; the formalism of his pages presents a thicket that requires a labor-intensive "decoding"—a term, connoting difficulty, that both Spiegelman and Said use to discuss comics (Said, "Homage" ii; Spiegelman, Interview 61). Sacco's works push on the disjunctive back-and-forth between looking and reading: this rhythm—often awkward and time-consuming—is part of Sacco's "power to detain," in Said's formulation, especially valuable in treating a subject as politicized and ethically complicated as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Said praises the way Sacco's bizarre formal matching of acceleration (the pages jump with urgency) and deceleration (each page requires wading through) "furnish[es] readers with a long enough sojourn among a people" rarely represented with complexity and thoroughness (v).¹⁵ A comics page, unlike film or traditional prose narrative, is able to hold this contradictory flow in tension, as narrative development is delayed, retracked, or rendered recursive by the depth and volume of graphic texture.

To address the question of literacy proposed by the idea of "decoding" comics, we might consider Spiegelman's explanation of the term. His comments attach a specific, active literacy to comics: "It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy," he told the *Comics Journal* in 1995. "If comics have any problem now, it's that people don't even have the patience to decode comics at this point. . . . I don't know if we're the vanguard of another culture or if we're the last blacksmiths" (Interview 61). This comment appears to depart from what many still consider the medium to be: "Comics as a reading form," writes Will Eisner in *Graphic Storytelling*, "was always assumed to

be a threat to literacy" (3). Fredric Wertham, author of the incendiary 1954 *Seduction of the Innocent*, which helped introduce censorship in comic books, called comics reading "an evasion of reading and almost its opposite" (qtd. in Schmitt 157). Yet commentators on comics (e.g., McCloud, *Understanding* 66–93, 106; Carrier 51) point out that because the form represents punctual, framed moments alternating with the blank space of the gutter onto which we must project causality, comics as a form requires a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation, even fostering a kind of interpretive "intimacy" (McCloud, *Understanding* 69). And within its panels graphic narrative, as my brief discussion of Sacco suggests, can require slowing down; the form can place a great demand on our cognitive skills. Just as an author's spatial construction of the page can beg rereadings and deliberately confuse narrative linearity (in comics, reading can occur in all directions), the basic narrative requires a high degree of cognitive engagement.¹⁶ In his *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco spatializes the elliptical prose style of avant-garde writers such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, fragmenting boxes of text and floating them over his images. Spatializing the verbal narrative to dramatize or disrupt the visual narrative threads ellipses into the grammar of a medium already characterized by the elliptical structure of the frame-gutter-frame sequence. We may note such an example in one of Sacco's most disturbing pages in *Safe Area Goražde*, which represents the testimony of Sacco's Bosnian friend and translator Edin and depicts the dead bodies of Edin's friends, four men who died in the first day of the first Serb attack on Goražde in May 1992 (fig. 2).

The anxiety about the visual that Mitchell wrote about when he identified a "pictorial turn" in the 1990s—along with a suspicion of a form marked deeply by its popular history—is evident in the negative reaction many in the academy have to the notion of "literary" comics as objects of inquiry. Hirsch, in her 2004

FIG. 2

Page 93 from Sacco's
Safe Area Goražde.
Used by permission
of Joe Sacco.



Editor's Column "Collateral Damage," notes the fear in our profession "that in the current media age our students (never mind our public officials) have lost their verbal literacy and have given themselves over to an overwhelmingly dominant, uncontrollable visuality that impairs thought." But she also writes—introducing the contributions to a *PMLA* issue on literary studies and the visual arts, including the four position papers on visuality in *The Changing Profession*—that these works "reveal to me that our field has already moved beyond this anxiety" (1210).

Indeed, now is the time to expand scholarly expertise and interest in comics. "What kind of visual-verbal literacy can respond to the needs of the present moment?" Hirsch asks (1212). Certainly, I wager—as does Hirsch, who goes on to analyze Spiegelman's most recent book, *In the Shadow of No Towers*—that graphic narrative opens up some of the most pressing questions put to literature today: What is the texture of narrative forms that are relevant to ethical representations of history? What are the current stakes surrounding the right to show and to tell history? What are the risks of representation? How do people understand their lives through narrative design and render the difficult processes of memory intelligible? Graphic narrative has echoed and expanded on the formal inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift toward the democracy of popular forms. In the graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention. Critical approaches to literature, as they are starting to do, need to direct more sustained attention to this developing form—a form that demands a rethinking of narrative, genre, and, to use James Joyce's phrase, today's "ineluctable modality of the visible" (31).

NOTES

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1. I explore this in a forthcoming essay comparing fiction and comics ("*Ragtime*").

2. One reason that *graphic novel* as a descriptive term is now so prevalent is that it became, however awkwardly, an official catchphrase for a huge stratum of work in the medium of comics. Even just a few years ago, the term was urgently needed in a practical sense as a label that could distinguish serious, adult work from comics for children. *Publishers Weekly*, writing in 2003 about a publisher-sponsored campaign to expand bookstore classification systems so that they would—in the campaigners' words—"accurately reflect the diversity of the comics medium," noted, "Indeed, many retailers continue to believe erroneously that comics are either primarily about superheroes or are intended only for children." In a subsequent 2003 article, *Publishers Weekly* reported that Spiegelman and several comics publishers were successful in lobbying the Book Industry Standards and Communications committee, which generates categories that assist retailers in categorizing and shelving books, to "create a major category for graphic novels/comics, with sub-headings for fiction, non-fiction, anthologies, and comic technique, among others." See Reid; Macdonald.

3. This has been disputed; Harvey claims, for instance, that the first text to be identified as a "graphic novel" is George Metzger's 1976 *Beyond Time and Again*, which he reports had the term on the title page and dust-jacket flaps. Eisner's 1978 book was published simultaneously in paperback and hardcover, and, as he told *Time* magazine, the subtitle "A Graphic Novel" appeared only on the cover of the paperback. However, it is indisputable that Eisner—who claims not to know the term had been used earlier—"was in a position to change the direction of comics," as he puts it, because his book was the first of its kind since the "wordless novels" of the late 1920s, the 1930s, and the 1940s to be published outside the comics system as a work of literature. See Arnold.

4. *Comics*, like the term for any medium, requires a singular verb. Treating *comics* as a singular has become standard; McCloud writes in his definition, for instance, that comics is "plural in form, used with a singular verb" (*Understanding* 9). See also Varnum and Gibbons (xiii), among numerous other scholars supporting this usage.

5. Lefèvre usefully compares United States formats with other international formats such as the European "album" (which typically runs about forty-eight pages) and the Japanese *manga* magazine (which typically runs three to four hundred pages).

6. Harrison notes that while *cartoon* and *caricature* are often used interchangeably, *caricature* usually sug-

gests a representation of a specific person (54). Harvey's two essays on comics taxonomy argue that the modern usage of *cartoon* began in London in the 1840s, in reference to *Punch*, the London humor magazine, which offered a satirical send-up of a competition exhibit of the cartoons, as they were then known, of patriotic-themed decorations for the New Palace of Westminster ("Comedy" 77–79; "Describing" 24).

7. Artists' books flourished during the twentieth century's most sustained periods of "utopianism," as Drucker points out: during the period of the historical avant-garde and in the 1960s. The history of artists' books, in this way, is similar to the history of graphic narrative.

8. McCloud uses the term at the suggestion of the writer Samuel R. Delany, who himself has written a graphic narrative, *Bread and Wine* (Interview 82).

9. Goethe's associates Johann Peter Eckermann and Frédéric Soret presented several of the Genevan's manuscripts to Goethe and then transmitted his enthusiasm back to Töpffer. This encouragement prompted Töpffer to publish, in his lifetime, seven picture-stories. Of Töpffer, Goethe claimed, "If for the future, he would choose a less frivolous subject and restrict himself a little, he would produce things beyond all conception" (qtd. in McCloud, *Understanding* 17). Wheeler, Beerbohm, and De Sá claim that Goethe's reflections on Töpffer were "known to the literate" (40).

10. Gardner treats the simultaneous rise of film and comics as mass media, arguing that Siegfried Kracauer's language describing the revolutionary potential of film applies to comics, but suggests that while film in the 1920s trained audiences to expect continuity, comics in this same period, crucially, celebrated discontinuity.

11. Heer and Worcester, for instance, include Thomas Mann's introduction to Frans Masereel's *Passionate Journey: A Novel Told in 165 Woodcuts* in their collection *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*. See also McCloud, *Understanding*; Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling*.

12. Generating the most complex analyses of graphic narrative to date, *Maus* is examined in articles focused on Holocaust representation (e.g., Hirsch "Family Pictures"; Huyssen; Brown; Rothberg; Young; Rosen; Landsberg; Staub; Koch); on memoir and autobiography (e.g., Miller; Iadonisi; Elmwood); on psychoanalysis (e.g., Levine; Bosmajian); on postmodernism (e.g., Hutcheon; Orvell); and on narrative theory (Ewert; McGlothlin). There are numerous essays and chapters on *Maus* in books (e.g., White; LaCapra 139–79; Baker 120–64; Liss 39–68; Hungerford 73–96), and a collection of *Maus* criticism was published by the University Press of Alabama in 2003 (Geis).

13. Mitchell also argues, however, that despite a widespread disavowal of form, "we are in fact committed to form and to various formalisms without knowing it." Thus, a new formalism is one "we will have already been committed to for some time without knowing it" (324).

14. These boundaries, in the case of an author like Satriapi, can be very real: her *Persepolis* has not been trans-

lated into her native Farsi and is sold only on the black market in her home country.

15. While Said's use of "detain" may be charged, framing and politicizing Sacco's work as a textual counterattack on the material Israeli detainment of Palestinians, Said's introduction to *Palestine* does not clarify or expand on this notion, instead emphasizing, as I choose to do here, the nonnarrativity and the closely packed aspect of Sacco's pages, which obstruct a quick purchase on meaning.

16. Eisner points out, "In comics, no one really knows for certain whether the words are read before or after viewing the picture. We have no real evidence that they are read simultaneously. There is a different cognitive process between reading words and pictures" (*Graphic Storytelling* 59).

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