

## Comics Across Media

### Jennifer Kelly

From WWII in Art Spiegelman's 1986 *Maus* to the Iranian Revolution in Marjane Satrapi's 2000 *Persepolis*, the narration of historical events through the medium of comic books has complicated the relationship between comics, historical texts, memoir, and war reporting. Joe Sacco's 1993-1995 *Palestine* and 2009 *Footnotes in Gaza*, for example, created out of scores of interviews with Palestinians, speaks volumes about the pairing of the comic genre and war reporting and its potential for historical veracity. One of the startling features of Joe Sacco's work in both *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza* is in fact its redundancy. In addition to taking note of the copious and overflowing amounts of tea served in Palestinian living rooms (makeshift or otherwise), Sacco bears witness to the sheer repetition of violence fracturing Palestinian homes and families. He consistently attempts, for example in *Footnotes in Gaza*, to root his interlocutors in their stories of the massacres in Khan Younis and Rafah in 1956, but he is foiled at nearly every endeavor to get at the past. His attempt to produce a coherent and seamless historical narrative is thwarted not only by the daily eruption of violence in the present, but also by his subjects' incapacity to see the relevance of investigating the past when its violence does not seem anomalous to that of the present. One senses in this repetition, simultaneously textual, narrative, and visual, that it is both vital and necessary, that it bears repeating because it has not yet been heard – though it has been spoken repeatedly for decades.

In *Palestine* alone, Sacco anticipates the work of a multitude of other scholars in giving serious and sustained treatment to the question of youth and violence, the politics of tourism in refugee camps, the intricacies of torture in Israeli prisons, the role of the U.S. in Israeli state practice, the religious significance of the *hijab*, the past and present Israeli stranglehold on Palestinian agriculture, and the pitfalls of the peace process. In *Footnotes in Gaza*, he deepens his analysis, paying much closer attention to the imperatives of fact checking in witness testimony and the political economy of journalism as a genre. He further explores questions of memory and veracity, elucidating the sheer volume of death in Gaza and the inadequacy of its reportage and investigating the overabundance and linear impossibilities of historical memory because, in the words of one of his interviewees, "events are continuous."

While it too is deeply concerned with questions of memory and the difficulty of excavating historical events from memory, Ari Folman's 2008 *Waltz with Bashir* paints an entirely different picture of Israeli state violence. The film advances a narrative that exonerates Israeli soldiers from a conscious role in the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 by articulating that Christian Phalangists carried out the massacre surrounded and aided by circles of Israeli soldiers who did not realize they were witnessing a massacre. Throughout the film, repeated references are made to the soldiers' youth (they had not yet started shaving), their inexperience, and their "uncontrollable fear that made them shoot" at everything and anything despite their two years of training. Folman's work squarely relegates Israeli violence to the past; the violence in the film exists solely in flashbacks and memories in contradistinction to peaceful and serene conversations in living rooms, coffee shops, and bars among friends and colleagues in the present of the film's making. Sabra and Shatila haunt the narrative, and though the plot is ostensibly driven by Folman's quest to recuperate his memory of what happened there, he makes no endeavor to reveal what actually happened inside the camps. Moreover, the aftermath of the

massacre is paired with live footage of Palestinian refugees screaming and mourning in untranslated Arabic (although the Hebrew, German, and English in the film are all accompanied by subtitles), which, in stark contrast to Sacco's work, precludes the possibility of the narration of Israeli state violence by Palestinian refugees themselves.

Reading Sacco's and Folman's work in conjunction provides an opportunity to look at two profoundly different political projects, one an investigative journalist exposé, via the medium of the comic book, on the occupation through the eyes of those whom it has displaced and one an individual's quest, via the medium of animation, to remember his own role in historical state practice through his and his fellow soldiers' eyes alone. Reading their work comparatively underscores the political (although entirely hypothetical) potential of creating filmic adaptations of works like Sacco's and begs a series of questions about both medium and narration. First, what kinds of historical narratives are possible through the medium of large-scale animation, in terms of its projected audience, in contradistinction to the kinds of history to which readers of historical/political graphic novels are amenable? Second, are investigative journalistic pieces that take Israeli state violence and Palestinian refugees as their subjects, produced in comic book *or* animated form, less likely to receive the critical acclaim of a work like *Waltz with Bashir*, which takes the emotional plight of Israeli soldiers as its subject? Third, is there a way in which the comic genre trades in an ability to level critiques that are otherwise subject to censorship in a way that animation does not? If that is the case, what do we make of the filmic adaptation of *Persepolis*, which posed questions about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East that are otherwise subject to criticism and obfuscation, like the U.S.'s role in the Iran/Iraq War? In the case of Israel and Palestine, the potential for historical veracity in the comic and animation genres may, in the end, have far less to do with the question of medium than it does with the need for a collective willingness to explore the actual contours of past and present Israeli state violence by all those who have been touched by it.