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“Running in Both Directions”: The Reflective Character of Single-Image Narratives in Joe Sacco’s Graphic Journalism

Abstract: This article examines single-image narrative forms, demonstrating how they inform and problematize Joe Sacco’s works of graphic journalism. I analyze three different single-image narratives, the splash page, the spread, and the bleed, originally found in superhero and adventure comics, and show how they function in Joe Sacco’s *Safe Area Goražde*, *The Fixer*, and *Palestine*. Single-image narrative forms problematize visual reporting as suspended between involvement and distance. I investigate how Joe Sacco, a graphic artist and a journalist in one person, manipulates images which were originally conceived as “attention grabbers” for the comics reader so that they become a commentary on the ethics of journalism

Key Words: Joe Sacco, graphic novel, graphic journalism, graphic storytelling, visual narration

“They say when the shooting starts, the writers run for shelter, the photographers run toward the shooting. Since comic artists use both words and images, perhaps they have to run in both directions at the same time,” W.J.T. Mitchell (70) once observed, commenting on the work of the graphic journalist Joe Sacco. Indeed, running in both directions at the same time also appears to be an apt metaphor for how the graphic novel functions in general. The form utilizes both words and images to convey the storyline and is continuously suspended between reading and viewing. It has long matured beyond the carefreeness of “funny stories” or the juvenileness of superhero tales, addressing such serious issues as trauma, violence, and war. Concurrently with the development in the field of subject matter, there came the development in terms of form. Traditional building blocks of comics, including sequences, panels, and single-image forms, such as splash pages, spreads, and bleeds, have begun to undergo transformation. Joe Sacco is one of the artists who re-invigorated graphic storytelling as both an art and a narrative form capable of critical investigation of the contemporary world.

As a trained professional (Sacco studied journalism at the University of Oregon), the graphic journalist always places great emphasis on realistic drawing and the accuracy of facts, numbers, and dates. His shorter pieces have appeared in such celebrated titles as *Time*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Foreign Policy* (Duncan et al. 1). He is also the author of a number of long-form works, in which he investigates extensively the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (*Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*) and the Bosnian War (*The Fixer*, *Safe*

Area Gorazde, and *War's End*). Apart from wearing the hat of the reporter, however, Sacco also explores the immediacy and emotional impact granted by the image. The appeal of graphic journalism lies in the multiplicity of points of view, experiences, and voices it is able to relate. According to Sacco,

[i]t's a visual world and people respond to visuals. With comics you can put interesting and solid information in a format that's pretty palpable. For me, one advantage of [graphic] journalism is that I can depict the past, which is hard to do if you're a photographer or filmmaker. History can make you realize that the present is just one layer of a story. (Gilson)

Indeed, in Sacco's works the basic level of "telling other people's story" is further widened to include not only the past but also yet another dimension, that of Sacco himself. Sacco thus does not hesitate to break the first rule of journalism: that is to be objective. In fact, Sacco's graphic journalism combines the traditions of graphic novels, comics, and the New Journalism, synthesizing "the professional methods of a journalist and even the historian with the necessarily subjective filter" of graphic storytelling (Worden 6). Sacco creates the art of war that is historically accurate, emotionally engaging, and ethically reflexive.

The purpose of this article is to explore single-image narrative forms in Sacco's works, including *Safe Area Gorazde*, *The Fixer*, and *Palestine*. I shall examine the splash page, the spread, and the bleed and demonstrate how they inform and problematize "graphic reporting" practiced by Sacco. I will analyze three different forms of single-image narratives which were originally found in adventure and superhero comics and show how their function within the larger structure of the narrative changes when employed in a work of graphic journalism. Specifically, I would like to examine how Joe Sacco, a graphic artist and a journalist in one person, is able to manipulate elements which originally functioned as "attention grabbers" meant to attract the comics reader so that they transform into powerful statements on the journalism's moral responsibility. Indeed, the splash page, the spread, and the bleed act as subversive elements which make the reader/viewer reflect on the nature of the story he or she is reading, challenge the journalist's creed, and problematize reporting as suspended between the objective and the subjective.

"Go Away": The Splash Page as a Subversive Tool

Though formally related, splash pages, spreads and bleeds play different roles in the system of comics. The splash page introduces the story, the bleed renders it more dynamic, while the spread, spanning two or more pages, is often employed for a dramatic effect or in order to momentarily bring a fast-paced story to a standstill. Still other varieties are also possible as well—for example, one may speak of splashes or bleeds in the form of a spread. Indeed, as Charles Hatfield points out, a key tension on the comics page is the result of confronting a series of images with a single full-page image, where the page-as-a-whole counterbalances the rhythm imposed by the

sequence (85). While splashes, spreads, and bleeds partake in the aesthetic experiments described by Hatfield, they also pose some interesting semantic questions.

The splash page is most often an opening page in a comics book. It is an image that extends beyond a single panel and very often occupies the entire page or even two facing pages. It may be limited by the margin or run to the edge of the page. As Robert S. Petersen explains, the splash page

functioned in a manner similar to a monoscenic narrative where the whole page would be turned into a single large image that would grab the reader at the start of the story. Like the cover of the comic book, the splash page often illustrated some important later moment in the story, distilling the conflict, and setting the mood for what was to come. (150)

The splash page was developed and mastered by Will Eisner, who first began using it in *The spirit* in the 1940s (Greenberger 39-41). “When I began, I saw the splash page merely as something that should grab the attention of someone flipping through the newspaper,” Eisner observes, “I soon became theoretical about it and saw it as something more than a design element. It could set the scene, set a mood, define a situation” (qtd. in Harvey 70). The first page of the story acts as an introduction—it is a “launching pad” for the story that follows. It also establishes a “frame of reference” (Eisner 62) for the entire narrative. The splash page is a canonic element of comics devised in order to “sell” the story. The entire page, and not just a single panel, is devoted to attract the reader/viewer’s interest.

Essentially commercial and promotional in nature, the splash page appears to be at odds with the serious themes tackled by graphic journalism. It has been adopted and adapted by Sacco, albeit with a twist. The graphic reporter consistently opens respective chapters of his works with introductory splash pages, including *Palestine* (1996), *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), *The Fixer* (2003), and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), but his rendering of the form is meant to challenge and not simply attract the reader/viewer. Indeed, *Safe Area Goražde*, a journalistic graphic account about the Bosnian War, opens with a splash page which introduces the reader/viewer to the story, making him or her reflect on the nature of the story at the same time (*Goražde* 1) (Figure 1). In a clever and ironic gesture, the title of the first chapter and the corresponding drawing contradict and oppose one another. The title reads “Go away” and the image shows a convoy of UN trucks and army vehicles entering Goražde. The city is ruined by the war. The abandoned houses bear the marks of missiles and fire. Toying with the phrase “no-man’s land” inserted in a caption below the title (*Goražde* 1), Sacco presents both the city’s complex geopolitical situation and the fact that it is partially deserted. The convoy, however, proceeds up the page, into Goražde, only to face the title “Go away” looming on the horizon at the top. Thus, Sacco draws the reader/viewer in by means of carefully planned composition (the reader/viewer may “enter” the image in the bottom left corner where the road leading simultaneously into Goražde and towards the top of the page starts; the reader/viewer then follows the road) and discourages him or her with an ambivalent verbal message.

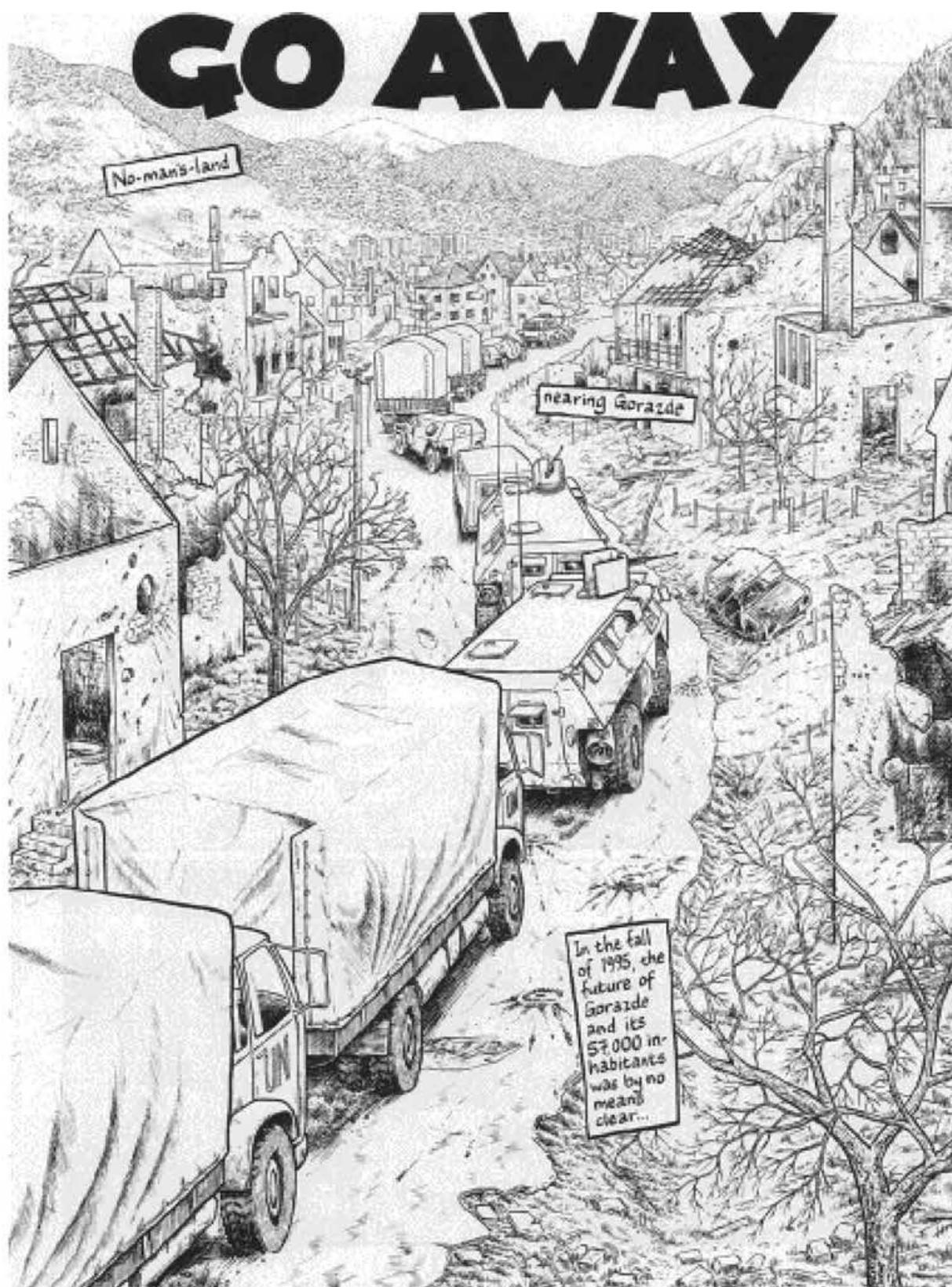


Figure 1. From *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-95* by Joe Sacco, copyright © 2000 by Joe Sacco. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

While in *The Spirit* the splash page was supposed to attract the comics reader, in Sacco's account of the war the role of such an image is more nuanced. On the one hand, in keeping with its comics heritage, the splash page introduces the story and establishes the mood. Sacco clearly shows the devastating effects of war and the situation of the people living in the constant fear of military attacks. In a way, he treats the landscape like a character, allowing it to speak for itself and convey the harsh realities of life in a military zone. Viewed in this perspective, Sacco's splash page in a sense adheres to its traditional role, insofar as it sets the mood. On the other hand, through the urgent appeal of the title, the splash page also advises the reader/viewer to "go away" and discontinue reading. "Well then, Sacco seems to be saying," Christopher Hitchens (ii) observes, "will you turn away from the extermination and dispossession of those who are so much like your own unlovely self?" or will you continue reading despite the story's grave subject matter. Sacco's splash page does not attract but demonstrates the ugly truth of war. Indeed, in a single intricate gesture, Sacco both acknowledges his comics roots and challenges them, establishing the splash page as a subversive tool.

"When Does a Picture Speak for Itself?": The Spread as a (Professional) Statement

Another strategy that the contemporary American graphic novel adopted and adapted from the comics book is the use of the so-called spreads. The spread is an image that extends over more than one page, incorporating the neighboring page as well. It may be surrounded, and thus framed, by a margin or run freely to the edges of the two pages. Unlike the splash page, it never commences a new story or a new chapter but "intervenes" in the sequential visual narrative, disrupting its flow. The spread functions as an anti-thesis and counterweight for the sequential character of the story, questioning the understanding of comics and graphic novels as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). The spread draws attention to its own painterly and purely visual qualities instead. It can also be seen as "a complete narrative unit in itself" (Magnussen and Christiansen 85). The power of the spread as a narrative unit is derived from its layout. Indeed, as Thierry Groensteen observes,

pages situated opposite each other are dependent on a natural solidarity, and predisposed to speak to each other. If it is possible for the artist to ignore this predisposition, there are, nonetheless, numerous ways to benefit from it... The solidarity of the left hand page and the right hand page is never pushed farther than it is in the case of a story told in two pages... leaving the eye to carry out the synthetic apprehension of the story in its totality. (36)

While numerous contemporary graphic novelists frequently insert full-page illustrations into the predominantly sequential graphic narrative, including Charles Burns in *Black Hole* (2005), Craig Thompson in *Habibi* (2011) and *Blankets* (2003), or David Small in *Stitches* (2009), no one has explored the full possibilities of double-page spreads in a manner similar to Joe Sacco.

In *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco presented the reader/viewer with the stark realities of War in Bosnia. In *The Fixer*, the graphic reporter returns to Bosnia to once again examine the causes of the military conflict and look at its aftermath. Sacco weaves a bitter but brilliant tale, in which he not only chronicles but also diagnoses the country as inherently torn and traumatized. Sacco's drawing style corresponds to the grave subject matter. His drawings are "monochrome, intricately cross-hatched and shaded, very much a product of the American underground scene that rejected the superhero ethos," Michel Faber writes, they "often have the impact of photographs that no photographer would dare take" ("An Anti-Hero of Our Time"). Sacco's "photographs" very often take the form of spreads, combining visual detail with the expressiveness of black and white drawing. They disrupt the narrative flow of the sequential tale and make the reader/viewer reflect on a scene which extends over the two facing pages. The analysis of a spread from *The Fixer* (12-13) showing a ruined cityscape of Sarajevo shall exemplify the possibilities of the form.

A clean geometrical form of the Holiday Inn hotel in Sarajevo dominates the page. Although located towards the right-hand side of a two-page spread, and not in its center, it draws the eye through carefully organized perspective lines which correspond to the outline of the road in front of the hotel. The building's sheer size and lighter shading also contribute to its dominant presence, as it stands out from a dark grey and stormy sky. The line of the horizon adheres to the "two thirds" rule of landscape painting—it is placed in the bottom part of the page so that it leaves the upper two thirds of the page for the sky—and the massive block on the right is balanced by two tall buildings towering against the sky on the left. While it looks like a photograph in black and white, or perhaps even as a lithograph or a woodcut, and adheres to the traditional compositional rules of landscape painting by utilizing the rules of perspective, this image is not a stand-alone work of art but a "disruption" in the flow of the sequential visual narrative that dominates in *The Fixer*. The spread lacks frames and gutters, the basic building blocks of graphic storytelling, and is limited only by the edges of the two pages. The drawing is not sequential but monoscopic and as such raises questions about its role and function in the story.

The spread is not to be admired for its painterly qualities only. Through the drawing's careful composition and expressive black-and-white drawing style Sacco in fact makes a professional statement on the role of the reporter. At the same time, he also manages to make a comment on the role of the reader/viewer in a non-fiction graphic tale. The drawing suggests desolation and depression. The mood is established by the stormy sky which, as has been noted above, takes up almost two thirds of the entire spread. As Sacco professed in one interview, though he essentially engages himself with journalism, he always acknowledges the medium in which

he is working (Mitchell 56). A certain expressiveness in drawing, Sacco claims, even if it conveys his subjective point of view, should be part and parcel of graphic narration. "It was dark. It was oppressive.... It is an expressive way of drawing it," Sacco observed in relation to the image of the Holiday Inn hotel in Sarajevo (Mitchell 56). Not only the sky carries emotional qualities. The damaged skyscrapers on the left, in turn, are a testament to the destructive power of the war as well as the country's economic decline—Hillary Chute calls them "relics of modernity and also, abandoned, artifacts of violence" (225). All in all, the entire scene reads not only like a beautiful, though dramatic, landscape but also as a testament to the horrors of war. Sacco takes full advantage of the space provided by the two opposite pages and composes an image that counters the reading rhythm introduced by panel arrangement. The spread slows down the reading and invites the reader/viewer to study a single drawing in more detail, thus revealing its hidden political and social significance.

Once engaged in such an analysis, the reader/viewer is certain to notice a solitary figure on the left. It is Joe Sacco—the reporter—walking to the hotel, hunching his shoulders. Indeed, as noted above, apart from reporting, the spread also offers a reflection on the role of the reporter. Sacco looks as if overwhelmed by the cityscape, the war, and the demands of his profession. Sacco in fact has commented on his ambiguous and ethically complex role of the war reporter in many an interview. As a trained journalist, he is fully aware of what it means to be a "professional" reporter. Sacco acknowledges that

journalism is kind of a cold thing, and it is a very cold profession if you are doing it well.... Really it is very clinical. It is like being a doctor. You are making an incision, you are taking out something not trying to do any damage, and then you are—well, I guess they have to saw themselves up after you've left. (Mitchell 65)

This cold, "clinical," and distanced approach, however, is constantly challenged by a different journalistic code of ethics, in which Sacco allows himself to be sympathetic to the people and the cause. Sacco admits that

[s]uddenly you just get involved. I need to put myself in the story now.... So to me being truthful about my role as a journalist, the filter that I am, the fact that I'm a Westerner in a foreign situation—all that is ethical. And to me, I won't say it is more ethical than the so called objective, but I think it is truer. It is more honest. (Mitchell 68)

By inserting himself in the spread, and thus in the entire story, Sacco acknowledges his subjective point of view in framing the narrative. The entire spread thus becomes a commentary on the journalistic profession. The reporter is no longer a distanced "third party" but a character in the tale. He allows himself to be consumed by the story he is creating. The "professional distance" disappears, exposed as dishonest.

The reader/viewer is not left indifferent either. The spread draws him or her in through the use of perspective. A broad white road opens before the reader/viewer, leading from the bottom edge of the page to the hotel. The reader/viewer is thus invited to join Sacco in his reporting quest, to enter the picture and thus the recounted story. The question that arises is “Will the reader/viewer follow?” Much as Sacco would like to engage his audience, the spread as a visual art form may convey an ambivalent message. As Jacques Rancière points out,

[f]ilm, video art, photography, installation and all forms of art can rework the frame of our perceptions none of them can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions... [because] there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action. (82)

Indeed, as R.E.H. Gordon observes in relation to Rancière claims, “art’s capacity to make political change involves numerous minuscule instances in which a spectator’s gaze differs from that which is expected of them” (130). Though critical art may intend to change and activate the masses, the actual outcome of such artistic practices is difficult to predict. It is possible, Rancière concludes, that images created in order to discredit the indifference involved in watching and not participating in “the spectacle” may fail to be acknowledged as political and social manifestos. A call to action is misinterpreted by the viewer as pure aesthetics. After all, “there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world” (Rancière 82). Sacco certainly attempts to engage the reader/viewer *via* aesthetics (visual language, including composition, perspective, expressive black-and-white drawing style). He openly acknowledges that the visual is supposed to “do all the work,” eliminating the verbal message. In an interview with W.J.T. Mitchell, Sacco thus comments on the role of the visual: “So I could have described everything I have told you in words. In fact I think in my script I actually did have words. But then part of the process of doing a comic is saying, okay, what words go out? When does a picture speak for itself? And I realized in this case, no words are necessary” (57). The graphic reporter relies only on the power of the image. He uses visual language to secure the reader/viewer’s participation, yet the results of such a strategy are unpredictable. Every reader/viewer needs to answer the question “Will I follow?” independently.

This notwithstanding, as can be seen in a complex play of the perspective, conventions of landscape painting, and war reporting which takes place in Sacco’s spread “the logic of visuality no longer arrives to supplement action,” to use Rancière’s words, but it arrives to “suspend it or duplicate it” (124). The image in itself constitutes a pause in the narrative (there is no “action” to speak of) but thanks to its composition, it also “duplicates” on a smaller scale the conflict at the heart of

The Fixer, namely how to find a voice that would honestly convey the experience of war.

Between the Subjective and the Objective: Questioning Journalism Through the Bleed

The final single-image form employed in the contemporary American graphic novel from comics is the so-called bleed. The bleed is an image that runs outside the border of the panel or the edges of the page. It introduces dynamism and dramatic tension to the story, but also problematizes the role of edges, borders, and limits. Indeed, the rectangle as a pictorial format, including the page in the graphic novel, “suggests the virtual extendability of pictorial space left, right, and above the stationary viewer” (Crowther 54). The bleed takes advantage of such a conceptualization of the format of the page, suggesting that the image spreads out beyond its edges. As Lan Dong (40) observes, the lack of the panel frame or a deliberate breach of limitations imposed by either the size of the panel or the page draws attention to the function framing plays in telling the story, i.e. it challenges the status of what is represented on the page and makes one wonder about what has been left out of the picture. “The effect of visual images literally being cut off at the edge of the physical page,” Dong (40) writes, “indicates what can be captured in words and visuals within the pages of the book” but also what failed to “make the cut.” In *Making Comics* Scott McCloud further develops the theory of the bleed, explaining that

[b]leeds... tend to open up a scene, not just because of increased panels sizes but also because they're no longer fully contained by the panel border and can, well, 'bleed' into our world or perhaps because we're conditioned by the panel-as-window experience and as if a window frame has passed beyond our peripheral vision; it usually means we're through it. (163-164)

Indeed, bleeds may play a fourfold role in the graphic narrative. They introduce dramatic tension, problematize framing, convey a sense of timelessness, and engage the reader/viewer in the recounted story. A bleed used by Joe Sacco in *Palestine* (146-147) (Figure 2), which depicts the author's experiences on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip in December 1991 and January 1992, exemplifies these aspects perfectly. At the same time, this image also problematizes the objective/subjective rift inherent to Sacco's graphic journalism.

The bleed presents an ordinary day in a Palestinian refugee camp, which Sacco visited in late 1991. The camp is bustling with activity, as people go about their business. Some children play in the streets, while other are on their way to school. A man is unpacking a horse-drawn cart, while cars drive by through the mud. The image is dynamic both because it depicts an active community and because it suggests that the scene portrayed is but one frame isolated from a larger social fabric extending beyond the page (even though the presence of the frame is not made

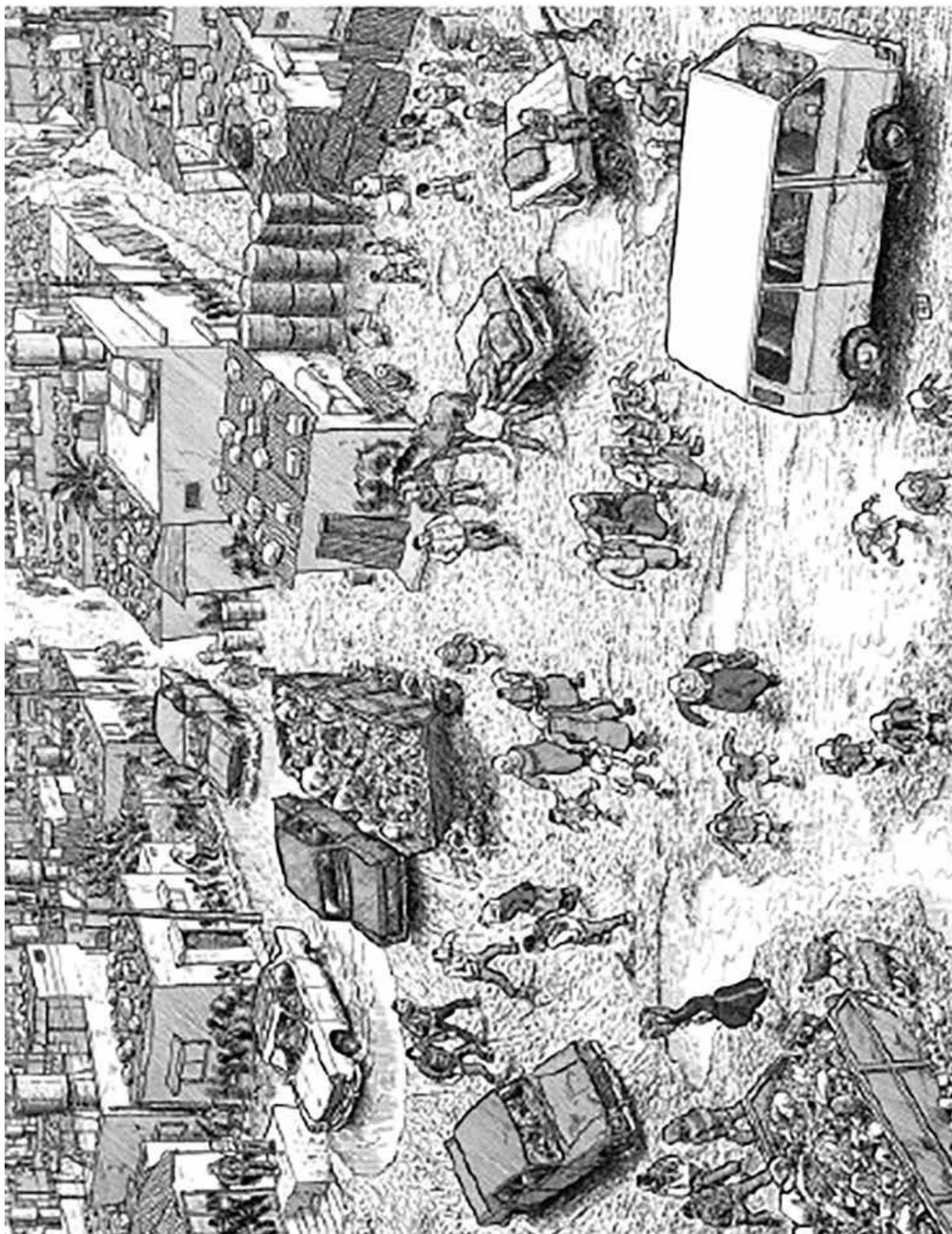


Figure 2. From *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, copyright © 1996 by Joe Sacco. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

explicit here as it coincides with the edges of the page). The image implies that it is a snapshot of reality taken without much consideration and alteration. Such an implication is not without importance in the context of graphic journalism practiced by Sacco. The dynamic character of the bleed translates into the immediacy of the reported experience. As far as the problem of framing is concerned, the bleed's detailed portrayal of everyday life, including cars driving through puddles, two men arguing, people looking out through the doors of the buildings surrounding the small muddy square in the center, is an example of a "raw" journalistic material. It also implies other stories that did not make the cut. On the other hand, the drawing also manages to convey a sense of timelessness that opposes the immediacy of journalism. Without the margin and frames, the image functions as a gap in the wider narrative sequence of *Palestine*. The fourth aspect of the bleed, equivalent to breaking the fourth wall in the theater, is also present here, inasmuch as the dynamic character of the image suggests a vision of "real life," which draws the reader/viewer in.

Sacco problematizes the latter aspect by adopting a heightened perspective. The reader/viewer watches, or indeed considering the amount of details included, reads, the scene from above. Such a point of view is a marker of distance and dominance. Thus, the bleed becomes a metaphor for the possibilities and limitations inherent to reporting. Sacco has struggled with them throughout his entire career as a graphic journalist. As already noted above, he has especially been concerned with the tension between the search for immediacy and directness and the withdrawal and detachment characteristic for the profession. The reporter enters a community and experiences its problems but is also constantly aware of the fact that he or she may leave at any time. Sacco has problematized this issue most poignantly in *Safe Area Gorazde*, saying that though he engaged with the locals through giving out gifts, conducting interviews, and paying home visits, he always knew he was able to leave the military zone and abandon the people with whom he bonded. "It'd been my turn to understand how much more than a few kilometers of road," Sacco observed, "separated me from them" (*Gorazde* 67).

This notwithstanding, the high-eye level perspective, abundance of details, and numerous scenes from everyday life employed by Sacco in many of his drawings may also be inspired by another source. Indeed, Sacco's bleeds, including the one from *Palestine* and other also present in this work (175, 176, 217), as well as bleeds from *Safe Area Gorazde* (14-15, 128) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (127), resemble the formal aspects of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting. While Sacco openly talks about his fascination with the Flemish Old Master (Marshall 45, Adams 128, Brandon 115), the link between the two artists should not be reduced to a stylistic trivia. On the contrary, it may be a starting point for a more nuanced analysis. In her examination of a two-page bleed from *Safe Area Gorazde* (14-15), Hillary Chute observes that Sacco's image

conveys the attention to detail that we also see in Bruegel, and the observational perspective his paintings offer—in which, as Joseph Koerner writes in an

essay on Bruegel's ethnography, 'history itself... is the shaping force of nature.' This double spread is evocative of Bruegel's *The triumph of death* (1562), whose swarming composition... is similar. But its view of a wrecked landscape is a countervisual to *Triumph*. It is one in which beset people, in the presence of death, are not devoured by it but maintain daily life. (220)

Thus, as Chute points out, when one considers the subject matter of Sacco's bleed (the harsh realities of war, the suffering of the civilian population) and the subject matter of Bruegel's painting (the Dance of Death), it can be seen that the two images correspond to but also counter one another. The former opposes death and the latter depicts its domination. Apart from such a thematic correlation, the formal aspects of Bruegel's painting, as adapted or quoted by Sacco in his drawings, should also be analyzed from the point of view of visual storytelling and its relation with the contemporary American graphic novel. Just as Bruegel-the-painter cannot be separated from Bruegel-the-storyteller, Sacco-the-reporter is one with Sacco-the-artist.

Indeed, Bruegel introduces a tradition of visual storytelling different from the sequential tradition present in Pre-Columbian picture manuscripts, the Bayeux tapestry, Egyptian mural paintings, or the Medieval *Tortures of Saint Erasmus*, listed by McCloud (*Understanding Comics* 10-16) as forefathers of comics and graphic novels. An understanding of Bruegel's principles of composition may inform the study of single-image narratives in the graphic novel. As Rick Altman points out, Bruegel's use of perspective and grouping of figures in space "exemplifies the important differences separating multiple-focus images [which bleeds are as well—M.O.] from their single-focus or dual-focus counterparts" (197). Indeed, let us take a look at one of Bruegel's multiple-focus images in order to understand the principles of such a form of visual storytelling. In *Census at Bethlehem* (1566) (Figure 3), the viewer is simultaneously attracted and distracted by the painting's different overlapping scenes.

On the one hand, the viewer is able to comprehend the entire painting because of the high-eye-level perspective that has been employed—the viewer has the impression that he or she observes the village and the landscape from above. On the other hand, the viewer's gaze constantly wanders around, trying to absorb numerous smaller scenes and groupings of people. Altman observes that "[b]y rejecting the satisfaction of visual unity, Bruegel pushes us toward nonvisual organization of narrative space" (229). The artist relies more on fragmentation, or fractionalization of the painting, than on a coherent and unified presentation of events.

What is also "nonvisual," and consequently "non-narrative," about Bruegel is the manner in which he arranges the scene. Violating the most basic compositional patterns, Bruegel frequently places an episode that is of crucial importance for the narrative towards the edges of the painting and not in the center. Indeed, in *Census at Bethlehem*, Joseph and Mary are seen at the bottom of the pictorial field. In the very center of the painting the viewer may discern instead a single wheel which disengaged from a cart depicted above it. While it may seem like a minor compositional breach, the conscious decision on behalf of the painter to disregard



Figure 3. *Census at Bethlehem* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel The Elder. Oil on panel (116 x 164 cm). Public domain image at Wikipedia Commons.

the center leads to significant narrative consequences.

As Rudolf Arnheim observes in *The Power of the Center* (2-10), the geometrical center of the pictorial space, which is established in relation to the painting's frame, very often corresponds to its central theme, i.e. the most important element from the point of view of the story presented in the picture. It is motivated by the fact that the enclosed simple geometrical form of the pictorial field (such as a square, a rectangle, or a circle) inevitably draws the eye towards its middle. "Since every dynamic center has the tendency to distribute the forces of its field symmetrically around itself," Arnheim emphasizes, "its location will often coincide with that of the geometrical middle" (2). Bruegel, however, challenges the power of the center in his works and thus problematizes the principles of visual storytelling. The Old Master exploits "a teasing contradiction between an element kept deliberately small and its crucial importance for the story being presented" (Arnheim 75). In *Census at Bethlehem*, the central theme is pushed aside towards the bottom of the painting, while the geometrical center is occupied by a wheel, which is irrelevant from the point of view of the narrative. The viewer is thus forced to move his or her gaze around the painting, looking for its actual narrative center. Bruegel in fact achieves the effect of zooming-in without altering the size of the image or its respective elements. It is the active viewer who "zooms in" with his or her gaze and thus engages with the painting in the process of looking for the picture's thematic center.

The mechanics of how a single image narrates and engages the viewer, as problematized in Bruegel's paintings, is a powerful point of reference for Sacco in his works. The graphic journalist, similarly to Bruegel, utilizes fragmentation and explores tensions generated by abusing the power of the center. Another look at the bleed from *Palestine* (146-147) (Figure 2) confirms such a claim. Fragmentation, as noted above, is an obvious feature of this drawing. Sacco populates the two pages with numerous figures, each involved in his or her own action. "Pages like this have no words," Sacco observes, "but they are meant to be read slowly" (Mitchell 60). Similarly to Bruegel's painting, no spectacular scene is witnessed at the drawing's geometrical center, located at the intersection of the two main axes of the pictorial space.

The thematic center is located in the bottom right corner of the drawing. It is a white minivan about to break through the implicit frames of the drawing, equivalent to the outer edges of the two pages, and disappear from the bleed (thus exploring the bleed's dynamic potential). Joe Sacco is being driven through a refugee camp in the white vehicle, observing the surroundings. This time, the reader/viewer sees in him both the author and the narrator/character guiding the reader/viewer through the pages and towns of *Palestine*/Palestine. The reader/viewer is aware of this narrative and visual nuance because the dominant framework in which this bleed is set begins with Sacco getting into the car (*Palestine* 145) and closes with the image of him looking out of the window of the minivan (*Palestine* 148). Sacco purposefully removes himself from the center, granting the reader/viewer the space to visually "roam" the drawing, so that he or she may "zoom in" and "out" of individual scenes. The reader/viewer may thus appreciate narrative multiplicity present in the bleed and engage with the image.

At this point, the question of the frame resurfaces in connection with Sacco's play with the center. While the bleed tries to transgress the constrictions of the frame, insofar as it lacks margin or panel lines and expansively appropriates the page, it also reveals itself as nevertheless constricted by the format of the book. The frame establishes itself as a phenomenon that is not only virtual or conceptual but also very much physical. The very possibility of escaping the frame is questioned. The reader/viewer is caught in a loop, oscillating between the bleed's programmatic negation of frames and their inevitability, inscribed in the graphic novel's physicality. The very attempt to escape or challenge the frame inherent to the form and function of the bleed is further problematized by its positing in the overall structure of *Palestine*. As noted above, the bleed is arranged in a wider framework of two other drawings, which provide an opening and a closing for the entire scene.

The opening image (*Palestine* 145) functions as a "preliminary threshold which the reader/viewer passes through" (Matthews 26) in order to "enter" the bleed and thus the seemingly frameless world depicted on the following pages. It sets the scene and introduces the place Joe Sacco visits by means of images and numerous captions distributed densely throughout the page. The captions dryly and sardonically announce that

[s]ome of the world's blackest holes are out in the open for anyone to see.../ For instance, you can tour a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.../ You call UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, Tel. 051-861195./ They'll set you up / drive you there themselves / admission is free.../ Probably they'll want you to add you to a group of Swedes or Japanese.../ but you'll want your refugee camp experience to be an intimate thing / insist they take you out alone / Tell them you want to take pictures, tell them you want to talk to refugees / when you want them to stop, let them know [forward slashes indicate division into captions—M.O.]. (*Palestine* 145)

Joe, posing as a disillusioned reporter, is driving in the white van through the muddy, busy and narrow streets. The page is divided into two rectangular panels. Their outer edges correspond to the edges of the page, while the boundary between them is not realized as a line but takes the form of the title of the chapter "Refugeeland." The point of view employed in both panels foreshadows the high-eye-level perspective employed in the bleed on the following two pages. Indeed, the perspective in the top panel represents the eye level of the reader/viewer. It rises slightly in the bottom panel, only to move still higher up in the bleed itself (*Palestine* 146-147) and narrow down in a rather dramatic manner on the following page (*Palestine* 148).

Indeed, page 148 constitutes a powerful counterpoint to the panoramic scene portrayed in the bleed. It shows the profile of Joe Sacco looking out of the window of the car. The page is divided into three rectangular panels. In the first panel at the top of the page the reader/viewer is presented with a frame within a frame. The outer frame is the frame of the panel, partially interblending with the edges of the page. The inner frame is the frame of the car window through which Sacco watches the refugee camp. The role of the window and framing is thus explored as distancing, divisive, and almost oppressive. Framing means that "what [one] sees in the picture [is] not... a part of the world in which he lives and acts, but... a statement about that world, at which he looks from the outside" (Arnheim 52). While the division between the world inside and outside the frame may seem a question of scale or an apt metaphor when applied to a landscape painting or an imaginary scene, it has profound consequences for a journalistic text.

Sacco balances between the amplified realistic character of detailed black-and-white (and often full-page) drawings and the repressed shameful sensation of being an outsider who will never be able to obtain, and consequently document, first-hand experience of the Palestinian people. He in fact has referred to the position into which he was forced as "unreality"—he felt that he was "on a safari" (Mitchell 57). The journalistic reportage is thus exposed as a kind of a simulacrum. Sacco attempts to create the effect of reality as he is unable to truly understand the situation of the people involved in the conflict. Sacco's detailed panoramic bleed, which was meant to give the reader/viewer a realistic portrayal of Palestine and its people, is involved in a play of double-readings. The bleed oscillates between the real and the imitative, the authentic and the altered, the frameless and the framed.

The frame and the act of framing shown and performed on page 148 also indicates Sacco's active role in building the story. While the panoramic bleed (*Palestine* 146-147), unbound and large-scale, downplays the presence and decisiveness of the author/narrator/character, insofar as it allows the reader/viewer to wander through the image freely, a sequence of framed images on page 148 openly introduces Sacco's personal and controlling perspective. He partakes in what Nicholas Mirzoeff refers to as "[c]lassifying, separating, and aestheticizing" (476) of the gaze. It is Sacco-the journalist/the narrator/the character who looks out of the window. His is the view, literally and metaphorically, with which the reader/viewer is presented. Sacco thus frames and simultaneously de-frames *Palestine* in a twofold manner. He divides the story into panels and sequences and then consciously undermines this structure with bleeds and spreads, problematizing the role and function of the frame in visual and verbal storytelling. The graphic journalist also frames the story by means of his political and ideological agenda and tries to de-frame it by including the voices of eyewitnesses or locals. The frame of the subjective and the absence thereof, implying the objective, clash. Ultimately, just as it is impossible to escape the pictorial frame, either understood as an explicit or implicit phenomenon, escaping the limits of the personal is also deemed unachievable.

Sacco ends "Refugeeland" with a one-page sequence with a subheading entitled "Edward Said" (*Palestine* 177). Mixing the profane with the political, Sacco shows himself taking a hot shower (a far cry from the harsh realities of the refugee camp) and subsequently discussing politics with his friend. Before going to bed, Joe picks up a book, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, commenting that

[t]he talk with Larry [Sacco's friend—M.O.] has sharpened my wits and I make it through a couple dozen pages of Said's dense prose.../ I like Edward Said.../ He's a Palestinian-American, a professor at Columbia.../ His "The Question of Palestine" is one of the reasons I am here.../ Tomorrow I'm going to another camp, Jabalia.../ I'd rather not.../ I'd rather sit around the heater with people like Larry and read Edward Said... (*Palestine* 177).

By framing his vision in that of Said's Sacco retains "a certain internal coherence" (Derrida 69) but also demonstrates that there is no objective journalism and there is no account without ideology.

Indeed, as Joe Sacco's appropriation of the splash page, the spread, and the bleed demonstrates, a certain duality is inscribed in the profession of the graphic journalist. Sacco is torn between "running in both directions at the same time" (Mitchell 70). This division concerns not only the split between the writer and the visual chronicler, but also the rift between involvement and distance, subjectivism and objectivism intrinsic to the profession. Sacco adopts and adapts the splash page, the spread, and the bleed, exposing their reflective character. Originally used in superhero or adventure comics as visual "grabbers," the splash page, the spread, and the bleed are creatively transformed by Sacco. The splash page makes the reader/viewer reflect on the nature of the story he or she is reading. The

spread challenges fundamental principles of journalism. The bleed problematizes reporting as suspended between the objective and the subjective. As Sacco's work demonstrates, contemporary graphic novelists simultaneously draw on and reimagine comics conventions, trying to push the medium beyond the limits that have defined it for so long. Most importantly, however, as Art Spiegelman argues, Joe Sacco in his works exposes "[t]he phony objectivity that comes with a camera.... To write a comics journalism report you're already making an acknowledgment of biases and an urgency that communicates another level of information" (qtd. in Williams 53). Rather than asking the reader/viewer to accept his version uncritically, the graphic reporter constructs a narrative that encourages interpretation and reflection.

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