Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism

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Introduction

The desire of artists and authors to document social and political events, and the means by which they might do so, is an enduringly contentious subject. To explore this question the book examines a sample of contemporary documentaries in the graphic novel medium that give accounts of social crises. These novels are located and defined as part of a radical practice of realism, produced by artist-authors challenging orthodox mythologies.

The term graphic novel (sometimes referred to generically as 'image text'[1]) denotes the development of comic books for an audience interested in politics, current affairs and literature, and it is employed liberally in this book to allow for the inclusion of contemporary illustrated novels. The concept and classification of graphic novels have long been controversial, as is the way that they are situated in the field of cultural production, inextricably bound up as they are with the political context of state and society. The forms that documentary graphic novel authors use, and their appropriateness for creating narratives that explore conditions of social crises, are a central concern in this book; a fundamental question it asks is why some authors turn to graphic novel forms to deal with social/political catastrophes – and how appropriate the medium is for the documentary representation of these events.

The graphic novels used here conform to definitions (overtly or obliquely) of a critical social realism, in that they deal textually and visually with disruptive social or political events, and their various critical devices may be said to reveal something of the underlying social configurations. The term realism is frequently conflated with mimesis, or 'likeness' of depiction; in this book however, realism

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1   Defined and analysed in Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

refers to political critiques of beliefs and values, as opposed to the correspondence of depictions to (pre-existing) ideas about lifelike representations.

The authors referred to in this book examine the conditions of displaced and dispossessed people, and offer dramatic accounts of survival (or otherwise) in the face of overwhelming adversity. Seminal works that have explored such social upheaval are used as case studies, and through them theoretical and technical issues are discussed; these key works are Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine,* Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* W.G. Sebald's *Emigrants,* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus.*[2]

Barefoot Gen is the first Japanese manga (comic book) to have been translated and republished in the West on a large scale, and is an autobiography of childhood in the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945; *Palestine* documents Sacco's interviews with Palestinians, who recount their experience of life under occupation; *Persepolis* describes a young girl's experience of growing up in Iran under political revolution, and the effect upon young women of the nation's transformation into an authoritarian religious state, resulting in her exile in Europe; the illustrated novel *Emigrants* recounts the enduring suffering of generations as a consequence of the Holocaust and the wars in Europe, and is an image text work[3] that differs from the other graphic novels in that it is largely text-based, with a profusion of images liberally inserted throughout; *Maus* is an account of the author's parents surviving the Holocaust, and the subsequent fraught relationships between parent and son as his father recounts the traumatic narrative.

2   Keiji Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: Volume I, A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004); Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2001); Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003); W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz,* trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2002); Sebald, W.G. *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002); Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003).
3   Despite the more appropriate 'image text' name for Sebald's novels, for convenience and brevity his and all of the works discussed in this book are referred to as graphic novels.

All of these graphic novels have been produced in the post-war period, specifically during the last thirty years, but only since the late 1980s have they come to prominence in the West. Their period of publication coincides with the emergence of comic books for adults to read in mainstream publishing, largely a development in the west of the 'underground' comic publishing activities in Europe and the US in the 1960s and '70s, and from serialised manga in Japan. Each of the selected authors challenges dominant accounts of the events they depict, and they were all writing either of extreme social upheavals in which military and cultural institutions of the state were directly involved. The authors all employ autobiographic devices that serve to privilege narrative authenticity and to certify documentary truth, as they perceived it.

These autobiographical (or pseudo autobiographical) works give visual and textual accounts of some of the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century.[4] Their subject matter is explored in a broad political and historical context, but there is no assumption that the authors are politically neutral, or that they present an objective documentary of events. Why it is that these authors should choose to adopt this particular graphic novel format to represent extreme conditions of social crisis, which were of profound importance to them, is one of the questions that this book seeks to explore. First, however, it is necessary to examine the graphic novel medium that is so compelling for these authors.

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4   All of which have been published in English; there have been good examples in many other languages. For example of Arab political comics are discussed at length in Allen Douglas and Malti-Douglas Fedwa, *Arab Comic Strips, Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University State Press, 1994).